Near-Death Experience in Indian Religions. Encountering Yama

by SHONA STOCKTON

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Abstract

Visions and possessions are closely linked to one another. They can be either negative or positive experiences. They are also known to derive from a variety of circumstances, which include: illness (temporary or life threatening), the side-effects of drugs (i.e. anaesthetic or *soma*), and states of unconsciousness (i.e. dreams or visitations). However, when they involve an encounter with Yama (the Hindu Lord of the Dead), I propose they should be considered the equivalent of near-death experience (NDE). To investigate this, I will examine a variety of textual sources from a historical point of view. The selected material is from three different periods and will be discussed in a chronological order to appreciate the changing of religious beliefs in South Asia. The first collection of literature belongs to the Vedic period and consists of mythological narratives from *Ṛgveda*, *Atharvaveda*, and the Upaniṣads. The second selection include the *Māhabhārata* and Purāṇas (Post-Vedic period), and the third assortment are contemporary ethnographic accounts. A comparative analysis of these sources permits to acknowledge how near-death experiences in India have changed from a sacrificial culture into one primarily concerned with the concept of *karma* (action) and its social and otherworldly outcomes, that is reward and punishment.

Declaration

"The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course".

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I argue that Indian mythological narratives detailing an encounter with Yama should be considered as near-death experiences (NDEs). I will identify the core features specific to this phenomenon in India whilst also highlighting the ways in which these experiences have developed across cultural and socio-religious changes.

NDEs are attested throughout different religions, cultures and societies in the world but they are understood and interpreted variously. The exploration of Indian NDEs from ancient times will serve to inform not just the perception of death in a religious context but, due to its implications, the way in which Hinduism is practiced today. This phenomenon, however, has been minimally investigated. Thus, I consider it to be an original field for further research and a way to fill a significant gap in our understanding of Hinduism.

In order to defend my argument, I first draw upon scientific and cultural explanations of NDEs. This is important insofar as Western and Indian societies tend to use different means to interpret their occurrence and meaning. In the West, NDEs are predominantly explained either empirically or spiritually. Conversely, in India they are framed into mythological narratives and there is no opposition between "science" and "religion". For this reason, it will: 1) examine the mythology of Yama, the Lord of the Dead in Hinduism and other Indic religions (Buddhism and Jainism); 2) employ a historical methodology in order to select textual sources describing NDEs from different Indian epochs; and 3) conduct a comparative analysis of these sources to identify similarities, differences and developments of this phenomenon.

The history of religions, an intellectual trend that developed significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Rüpke, 2011, 289), is a distinctive method which 'inten[ds] to grasp religion in its concreteness, in its historical creativity, and in its meaningfulness for the cultural, social, and individual lives with which it is interwoven' (Bianchi, 2005, 4061). It enables religion to be studied both phenomenologically and on the basis of historical and

cultural inquiry, comparison, and development (Bianchi, 2005, 4062-4065). Moreover, a particular practice pertaining to this methodology is the use of scriptural texts and narratives that belong to a religious community. This is because mythological and ritual narratives may be reflective of a society's past accounts, thus meaning that 'mythology and history are not opposites but variants of historical narratives' (Rüpke, 2011, 288). On this basis, the textual sources for this dissertation have be taken from three distinctive but extremely significant periods within Indian history: 1) the Vedic period, which informs the ancient culture of the Ārya clans; 2) the post-Vedic period, which bears witness to a period of transition informed by the cultural impact of Buddhism and Jainism; and 3) contemporary ethnographic accounts, reflecting Indian religions after the encountering with Islam (the early sultanates and the Moghul Empire) and Christianity (European colonialism and missionary activity). The sources from each era are discussed in a chronological order and are accompanied by a comparative analysis at the end of their chapter. I also include a final chapter in which I conduct an overall discussion and comparative analysis of all sources drawn upon throughout this dissertation. This final comparison is a vital section for the exploration of Indian NDEs as it allows for a complete observation of distinguishing traits, similarities and differences of this religious phenomena (Stausberg, 2011, 34). After highlighting these points, I move on to a summary of my findings on NDEs in the context of Indian religion and ethics.

Chapter 1

Near-death Experiences: Scientific and cultural explanations

Medical literature defines circumstances associated with bodily conditions within the orthodox framework of medicine and health but avoids phenomenological interpretations. For instance, the terms possession, visions and dreams are not recognised in medical encyclopaedias or dictionaries, unlike disease, illness and drugs. The medical lexis tends to define a disease as 'a condition of abnormal vital function involving any structure, part, or system of an organism' (Elsevier, 2017, 549). In some cases, disease is 'contrasted with illness, where the abnormal symptoms, thoughts, or feelings may be subjective and difficult to assess objectively' (Martin, 2016). Alternatively, illness is also defined in other medical encyclopaedias within its own terms: 'an abnormal process in which aspects of the social, physical, emotional, or intellectual condition and function of a person are diminished or impaired compared with that person's previous condition' (Elsevier, 2017, 899).

Like these two conditions, in which the functioning of the organism is impaired, a drug also appears to affect the body as it is defined as 'any substance that affects the structure or functioning of a living organism' (Martin, 2016). Based on these understandings, it could be supposed that '[m]odern medicine […] tends to treat the body and disease as ontologically distinct entities' (Cantor, 2000, 347). It is also important to recognise that Western medicine considers death as the 'absence of vital functions … [and] permanent cessation of the heartbeat' (Martin, 2016). However, this approach seems unable to explains situations in which the human body does not respond to expected patterns. That is the case of NDEs.

In this dissertation, after a brief summary of scientific theories on NDEs, I will focus on the cultural problematisation of death in Indian traditions. This will serve to interpret the mythology of Yama as not just a way to explain the inevitable end of life but also the problem

of the hereafter. In fact, I will argue that many myths detailing an encounter with Yama may be read as narratives reflecting NDEs.

1.1. Between life and death: neuroscience on NDE

The term 'near-death experience' (NDE) was coined by Raymond Moody in 1975 when he published his book *Life After Life*, which discusses the NDEs of fifty individuals whom recovered after being pronounced clinically dead (Moody, 1975).[1] A NDE is thought to be a 'vivid, realistic, subjective experience' (Greyson, 2015, 775) that is generally thought to occur 'in close-to-death situations (e.g. during a coma or a cardiac arrest with a flat EEG) (Bianco, Sambin and Palmieri, 2017, 1). They are also known to 'arise in circumstances that are not life-threatening (e.g. in severe depression or conditions of isolation), during meditation, or at the time of distressing, crucial life events' (Bianco, Sambin and Palmieri, 2017, 1).

The most common features of NDEs are: '(1) the difficulty of expressing in words an experience of such a nature, or *ineffability*; (2) the feeling of dying; (3) moving through darkness or a tunnel, a cave, a cylinder, a valley; (4) the sense of joy, love, and peace; (5) encountering the presence of deceased loved ones and other entities; (6) visions of beings of lights, guardian spirits, and so on – communication with these beings occurs without words, by the power of mere thought; (7) the perception of separation of the physical body, or out-of-body experience; (8) a life review, or a panoramic view of the proper life, or specific events that had happened in life; (9) many people reported hearing certain sounds, some of these were described as unpleasant (such as noise, buzzing, ringing sounds); and, finally, (10) the decision of conscious return' (Corazza, 2008, 28). Although NDEs do not include all of these features, their occurrence has long-lasting effects for the experiencer, such as an alteration in their

[1] Although Moody coined the term 'near-death experience', a Swiss geologist, Albert von St Gallen Heim, was the first individual to conduct formal studies within this area after he had a mystical experience after falling down a mountain when climbing (Corazza, 2008, 24).

beliefs, a change in their personal relationships with others, a heightened appreciation of life etc. (Greyson, 2015, 785; Noyes, 1980; Noyes, Fenwick, Holden and Christian, 2009).

The reason for the occurrence of NDEs is unknown and highly debated. Some scholars adopt a survivalist theory which explains the occurrence of a NDE as it 'advances suppositions toward a separation between mind and body, postulating a persistence of some sort of "soul" after the body's death' (Palmieri, Calvo, Kleinbub, Meconi, Marangoni, Barilaro, Broggio, Sambin and Sessa, 2014, 2). For others, a NDE can be explained in terms of the physiological state of the mammalian brain when in life-threatening situations. Theories based along this premise most often hold that cerebral hypoxia (decreased oxygen to the brain) is the causation of NDEs (Blackmore and Troscianko, 1988), or that it is the electrical activity produced by the brain during a near-death situation (Chawla, Akst, Junker, Jacobs and Seneff, 2009).

According to one influential hypothesis, 'the electrophysiological state of the brain following cardiac arrest' (Borjigin, Lee, Liu, Pal, Huff, Klarr, Sloboda, Hernandez, Wang, and Mashour, 2013, 14432) correlates different states of consciousness when near-death (Borjigin et al., 2013, 14432). In order to demonstrate the validity of such theory, Borjigin et al. 'monitored EEG signals over the frontal, parietal, and occipital cortices bilaterally in rats during wakefulness, anaesthesia, and cardiac arrest' (Borjigin et al., 2013, 14432). The results indicated that 'cardiac arrest induces a level of cortical directed connectivity in the near-death brain that far exceeds that observed during the waking state' (Borjigin et al., 2013, 14435). Thus, Borjigin et al. concluded that one could use these findings as a basis to identify the increased levels of activity in the mammalian brain during cardiac arrest, which could 'explain the highly lucid and realer-than-real mental experiences reported by near-death survivors' (Borjigin et al., 2013, 14436). However, this assertion has come into question by other research also pertaining to the neurophysiological activity in the dying mammalian brain.

Although it is known that '[t]he human brain possesses the capacity to generate internal

states of consciousness during dreaming, hallucinations and meditation' (Borjigin et al., 2013, 14432), it is uncertain whether the mammalian brain has the capacity to produce such states of consciousness during cardiac arrest. Bruce Greyson, Edward Kelly and William Dunseath (2013) have specifically addressed the claim that neurophysiological activity is related to NDE. According to Greyson et al., the suggestion that the 'electrical surge [apparent in rat brains] has implications for near-death experiences in humans seems premature' (Greyson et al., 2013, E4405). This assertion is based on the premise that the brain activity of rats cannot be compared to the activity of the human brain during a NDE because NDEs do not necessarily occur within the same conditions drawn upon in the experiment of Borjigin et al. (i.e. during cardiac arrest and after being induced with anaesthesia) (Greyson et al., 2013, E4405). Greyson et al. thus conclude that 'the finding of Borjigin et al. …. is unlikely to contribute to an understanding of near-death experiences' (Greyson et al., 2013, E4405).

Similarly, Pim van Lommel has also considered the medical suggestions for NDE (van Lommel, 2011). In his discussion, van Lommel also found that 'no activity of the cortex and the brainstem can be measured' (2011, 7), which also supports the claims of Greyson et al., and he later concluded that there is 'no medical explanation for the occurrence of an NDE' (van Lommel, 2011, 3). For these reasons, it appears unlikely that the experiment of Borjigin et al. can be used as a framework for understanding NDEs. However, it is important to consider such approaches when discussing NDEs, as they provide a framework in which to begin an analysis of such experiences whilst also outlining features associated with NDEs.

1.2. Cultural interpretations on NDE. Indian medicine and mythology.

If we interpret NDE in India as an extraordinary situation in which a human being faces Yama while still alive, then it is imperative to understand what are the circumstances for such an encountering and by what means this may happen. A survey of primary and secondary sources

reveals that while the event that triggers NDE may vary to a great degree, this is usually dependent upon visions and possession. They are caused by illness (either temporary or life-threatening conditions), the consumption of drugs (for ritual or therapeutic purposes) and dreams or visitations of sprits or deities. As it will be shown throughout this dissertation, visions and possession are not only closely related to NDE. Instead, a vision or possession is itself the near-death experience when: 1) produced from the circumstances discussed; and 2) it involves an encounter with Yama.

Although Western medical literature does not engage with possession or vision, the two terms play a central role within Indian literature, medical and otherwise. Thus, in order to understand their relationship and positions with NDEs in India, it is first important to recognise vison (√*dṛś*) and possession (*aveśa*, *praveśa* or *grahaṇa*) within cultural loci.[2]

In India, it is believed that 'a person can be possessed by external, supernatural beings' (Schömbucher, 2016, 223). States of possession are also known to have certain characteristic features. As explained by Frederick Smith, 'the defining feature of possession to both the possessed individual and the observer is marked by a psychological change that engenders recognizable modifications in speech and behaviour' (2006, 44). Smith also adds that possession is generally examined within 'five interpretative frameworks: (1) as demonic, opposed to God and good; (2) as a medically defined psychological state; (3) as a psychological condition engineered for the purpose of gaining social or even political control; (4) as an aspect of shamanism; and (5) as an existential reality' (2006, 39). Moreover, states of possession are generally consistent with visions.

When discussing oracles and their ability 'to manage the experience of spirit possession' in Tibet (Diemberger, 2005, 120), Hildegard Diemberger explains that during possession '[t]he

[2] 'The Sanskrit term *aveśa* ("entrance into") is used for benevolent, controlled, self-induced form of possession, whereas the terms *praveśa* ("to enter toward") and *grahaṇa* ("to grasp", "to seize") refer to the uncontrolled, harmful form of possession by malevolent spirits' (Schömbucher, 2016, 221).

God, in fact, is said to enter the body along the energy-channels and if these are not purified, the person may be affected by a variety of mental and physical illnesses' (2005, 120). She further asserts that '[u]ncontrolled visions, voices, fainting, weakness, and the experience of a death-like state are the most common symptoms' (2005, 120). Although Tibet is in a different geographical location than India, the statement is useful for describing the relationship between visions and possession, and it also reaffirms my supposition that visions, possession and NDEs are all interconnected with one another. Moreover, Diemberger offers another important insight to possession, as the visions and death-like state that she refers to appear consistent with the accounts of Indian NDEs.

There is little research on NDEs in India. In particular, there appears to be no cross-examination between NDEs encountered in India and Indian literature that pertains to such experience. Instead, some scholars have tended to focus on the actual NDE of individuals in India (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986; Pasricha; 2012; Blackmore, 1993; Osis and Haroldson, 1977; Corazza, 2008), whereas others have drawn upon conceptions of death or the afterlife in ancient and classical Indian literature (Shushan, 2009; Bodewitz; 1994; Bodewitz, 2000; Bodewitz, 2002; Filippi, 2005). Despite this gap, two scholars who have researched NDEs in India - Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson – provide a useful framework in which the features of such experiences can be recognised.

In 1986, Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson carried out their first preliminary report which aimed to draw comparisons between sixteen cases of NDEs in India and seventy-eight American cases of NDEs. In their report, they found that NDEs in India are likely to be characterised by the following core elements: (1) meeting with Yama, the lord of the dead; (2) being taken by messengers, namely the *Yamadūtas*; and (3) meeting Chitragupta, the deity who holds record of human beings' just and unjust deeds (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 167-168). However, after carrying out further research, Pasricha later concluded that Indian NDEs also

include: 4) visitation to other realms; 5) meeting with deceased relatives or acquaintances; 6) meeting a being of light; and 7) a visual residual mark left on the experiencer (Pasricha, 2008, 274). Although the residual mark is said to be one of the less common features of NDEs, it is useful to note that it is interpreted differently in Northern and Southern geographical areas of India (Pasricha, 2012, 96). 'As per the North Indian subjects [sic] these [the residual marks] were generated as they were forcefully pushed down with an instrument, like a trident or a burning wood, when they resisted coming back from the other realm; on the other hand, it is widely believed in Southern India, that a mark is put on every person when he returns from the other realm to the terrestrial life' (Pasricha, 2012, 96). Moreover, Pasricha has also confirmed that no individual in her earlier and subsequent studies reported the experience of a tunnel (2012, 96).[3]

Another prominent feature of Indian NDEs is the return of the individual. Unlike Western narratives of NDEs, in which the individual either returns due to a choice of their own, or after being told by a deceased person that it is not their time to pass over, Indian NDEs often involve an individual being sent back because of mistaken identity (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 168).[4] 'The error supposedly made is often a slight one, so that a person of the same given name but a different caste, or someone living in a different but nearby village, should have died and been brought instead of the subject [sic] of the NDE' (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 167). In each case, the individual is also said to encounter Yama or the *Yamadūtas*, before returning.

[3] This result does, however, contrast that of Susan Blackmore's as she found that some NDEs in India did involve a tunnel or dark space (1993).
[4] Indian individuals have also reported 'meeting with relatives and friends in the "other realm" in which they find themselves, but these persons have nothing to do or say about the prematurity of the subject's [sic] death and need for him or her to continue living' (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 168).

Chapter 2

The Mythology of Yama

In the Vedic tradition, Yama, twin brother of Yamī, is born of the divine couple Vivasvat (Brilliant One, the Sun) and Saraṇyū (Cloud). His siblings are the Aśvin twins, also known as Nāsatyas (the divine horsemen and the physicians of the gods), and Śraddhādeva Manu. While Manu is the progenitor of the human race in this age, being the seventh Manu, Yama is the first to die and therefore the first mortal. Although he was born immortal (RV.1.83.5), Yama chose to sacrifice himself 'for the sake of the gods … and for the sake of offspring' (RV.10.13.4). Indeed, by sacrificing his own body and becoming the first mortal, he discovered the path to the ancestral world:

1. To the one who has departed along the great slopes, having spied out the path for many, son of Vivasvant, unifier of the peoples—to Yama the king show favor with oblation.
2. Yama first found the way for us: this pasture-land is not to be taken away. (The way) on which our ancient forefathers departed, along that (do) those who have since been born (follow) along their own paths.
3. Mātalī having been strengthened along with the poets, Yama with the Aṅgirases, Bṛhaspati with the versifiers, both those whom the gods strengthen and who strengthen the gods— the ones [=gods] become exhilarated on (the cry) "*svāhā*," the others [=forefathers] on "*svadhā*."
4. This strewn grass here, Yama—just sit here on it, in concord with the Aṅgirases, our forefathers. Let mantras pronounced by poets convey you hither. Become exhilarated on this oblation, o king.
5. With the Aṅgirases, deserving of the sacrifice, come hither; Yama, become exhilarated here along with the Vairūpas – I call upon Vivasvant, who is your father—once having sat down at this sacrifice, on this ritual grass here.
6. The Aṅgirases, our forefathers, the Navagvas, the Atharvaṇas, the Bhṛgus deserving of soma— may we be in the favor of these who are deserving of the sacrifice; may we be also in their propitious benevolence. (RV.10.14.1-6).[5]

After finding the place where the ancestors (*pitṛ*) dwell, Yama was 'considered to be a king, a protector and a well-wisher of all the dead who reach his region' (Merh, 2006, 110). Yama also came to be known as the lord of the earth and the lord of the yonder world (heaven).

[5] All quotations from *Ṛgveda* are translated by Jamison and Brereton (2014).

However, he gradually became the lord of the southern quarter only (Merh, 2006, 106-107). His association with the South is explicitly mentioned in *Atharvaveda* 9.7.20-21, when each of the four directions are attributed to the gods:

> Indra when standing eastward, Yama when standing southward;
>
> Dhātar when standing Westward, Savitar when standing northward.[6]

In Vedic literature, Yama is depicted to have messengers, i.e. two dogs, birds, dreams and Mṛtyu (Death).

Throughout the *Ṛgveda*, various epithets are used to describe the two dogs: (1) Sārameyau (RV.10.14.10); (2) Udumbalau (RV.10.14.12); (3) Urunasau (RV. 10.14.12); (4) Caturaksau (RV.10.14.11); (5) Asutrpau (RV.10.14.12) (Merh, 2006, 49). Their appearance is said to be ferocious, and they each have a broad nose, four-eyes (representing sight in all four directions) and are brindled or brown in colour. One of their duties is to guard the path to Yama's house and the path to his realm. However, their main role is to guide the souls of the dead on their journey to Yama by ensuring they reach his kingdom without any difficulty (Merh, 2006, 52). In some literature, such as the *Kāthaka Samhīta* 33.14, the two dogs are said to be representations of day and night, whereas other texts, such as the *Atharvaveda* 6.80, identify them as the sun and moon (Merh, 2006, 53).

Two other messengers of Yama are an owl and pigeon. These two birds signify an ill-omen, especially if they enter the house, their hooting is heard, or if a pigeon places its foot near a fire.[7] A dream is also said to be an ill-omen or instrument (*karaṇa*) of Yama as he enters the mortals and presides over the bad dream (Merh, 2006, 57-58). Finally, Mṛtyu, although not explicitly associated with Yama at this stage in Indian literature, is also a wise messenger.

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[6] Translated by Whitney (1905).
[7] Cf. RV.10.165.

Mṛtyu is the one who takes the life of the dead and is thus the phenomena of death itself. This, however, began to change in the Upaniṣads, as Yama became clearly associated with death in several places, and in later literature (the Epics and Purāṇas), his close relationship with Mṛtyu became fully established.

Unlike Vedic literature, which describes Yama in terms of light, beauty and happiness, epic and purānic texts depict Yama 'in a horrific, even ghoulish, manner, although a notable exception is the description of his paradisal palace in Māhabhārata (2.8)' (Lincoln, 1981, 226-227). Yama is generally portrayed carrying a noose or rod (*daṇḍa*), and evil-doers and pious individuals are said to witness two different appearances of the Lord. For those how have performed good deeds, Yama transforms himself into Viṣṇu and appears 'four-armed, dark in complexion, having eyes like bloomed lotuses, holding the conch, the discus, the club and the lotus' (Merh, 2006, 188). In comparison, for those who have committed a sin, Yama assumes a fierce form: he has big eyes that look like lakes, his voice sounds like thunder at the time of the universal destruction, strong winds blow from his nostrils, his teeth and nails are said to be big, and he can be seen wearing an animal hide whilst holding a *daṇḍa* and riding a buffalo (Merh, 2006, 188). And, as will be discussed later, in some cases, he is also depicted wearing yellow clothes, a crown (which was bestowed to him by Brahmā), jewels and garland.

Yama's realm is known as *pretapateḥ puram* (the city of the lord of the dead) and his city is named Saṃyamani. In the city, there are three gates made of copper: 'the southern and western gates are for the entry of the sinners, while the northern gate is meant for deities, sages and other virtuous people' (Merh, 2006, 173). Although it is both the western and southern gates that allow entry for the sinners, the southern gate is said to be very hot and frightening, and is especially for the wicked, the flesh-eaters, sinners and the cruel (Merh, 2006, 173). Furthermore, Yama's city is said to resound of the joyful songs and sounds of gandharvas (subtle beings or demigods) and apsarases (water nymphs), and it also comprises three rivers

(Filippi, 2005, 173-201). The Puṣpodakā river is believed to destroy the sins of living beings and the Vaivasvatī is a pleasant and clean river that flows through the city (Filippi, 2005, 173). The third river, the Vaitaraṇi, is significant for the deceased who are joining Yama's realm. This is because 'the dead have to cross this blazing river in order to reach Yama' (Filippi, 2005, 173). Yet there is a ritual prescribed by the *Agnipurāṇa* that is said to aid the individual when making this treacherous journey: a gift of a black cow when one is on the verge of death (Filippi, 2005, 173). In addition to the depiction of his appearance and kingdom, Yama is also portrayed to have many roles.

First and formerly, Yama is the Lord of the Dead. However, he is also known as Dharmarāja, the supreme judge of one's good and evil deeds. If an individual commits a sin, whether openly or in secret, Yama sends them to the hells. Conversely, if an individual is pious as a result of their righteous deeds, Yama sends them to a higher world. This decision is made in Yama's court, when the individual reaches his realm, with the aid of his assistant Citragupta, i.e. the one who holds record of all just and unjust deeds.[8] Based on this aspect of Yama, it is appropriate to say that Yama and Dharma play similar roles in the functioning of action. As noted by Fabrizio Ferrari, '*dharma* comes from the root √*dhar* which means 'to keep', with reference to a law, an institution and the cosmic order … [and] Yama come[s] from √*yam*, that is 'to control', or from √*yu*, 'to take hold of' or 'to get possession of' (2004, 151). For this reason, Ferrari then further establishes that '[i]n both instances, Dharma and Yama are regulators: where the former controls movements and imposes order, the latter keeps under control the results of such order (i.e. human deeds) and is thus a judge' (2004, 151). Accordingly, individuals are more likely to adhere to the righteous path as they are aware of and fear Yama's punishments.

[8] When noting down all good and bad deeds performed, Citragupta cannot be influenced by any internal or external factors. In addition to this task, he is also said to calculate the life span of all living creatures, and he also suggests to Yama the fate the dead individual should encounter.

Another aspect of Yama is that of a warrior. In the Purāṇas and epics, Yama is Lord of the hells and, similar to Vedic mythology, he is also the guardian of the southern direction. When in this role, Yama is seen as the great warrior who fought in a fierce battle in order to protect the southern quarter. This battle also involved Rāvaṇa, the lord of *rākṣasa*s who attacked in the bid that he would conquer the south direction, and it also included Mṛtyu - Yama's close associate.[9] Other associates of Yama depicted in the epics and Purāṇas are: the *Yamadutās* (Yama's assistants); Citragupta (as previously mentioned); the two dogs, which remain similar to their Vedic description, although they are now said to protect the god's cows and the animals brought for sacrifice; birds (pigeon and owls which similarly represent bad-omens); Kāla (Time)[10] and a lady assistant who sits by the side of Yama in his court.

[9] Cf. Rām 7.22

[10] Kāla is said to forcibly ripen creatures by changing the seasons and months. He is also described to have a dark complexion, high chin, upraised hair, a deformed face with fierce teeth, and looking always angry as he holds onto a stick in his left hand (Merh, 2006, 181-182).

Chapter 3

Ancient and pre-modern India: *Ṛgveda*, *Atharvaveda* and the Upaniṣads

The Vedas (< √*vid*: "to know", "to understand") were orally composed and transmitted between ca. 1500 BCE and 500-400 BCE in the regions of north-western India, Greater Punjab, and northern Bihar (Witzel, 2005, 68). Later, during the early second millennium CE, they were transposed into a written tradition consisting of four parts: *Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yarjurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Each Veda is further subdivided into four levels (Samhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka, Upaniṣad) and is considered *śruti* (that which is "revealed" or "heard").[11] The knowledge embedded within this corpus of texts is primarily concerned with the performance of sacrifice (*yājna*), natural phenomena and hymns to the gods.[12] Accordingly, it was only members of the hereditary priestly class who were permitted to receive, and enact, this wisdom.

3.1. The Ṛgveda

The oldest Vedic text, the *Ṛgveda*, was fixated sometime before ca. 1200-1000 BCE.[13] It contains one thousand and twenty-eight hymns called *sūkta* (lit. well said) in a form of archaic Sanskrit known as Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) or Vedic Sanskrit. The hymns are divided into ten books, known as *maṇḍalas* (lit. circles or cycles), and they were composed by a number of different poets.[14] When drawing upon the Vedic hymns, we can establish the geographical region in which they were most likely transcribed (Jamison and Brereton, 2014, 5). This is because the various poems refer to several rivers ranging 'from the Kabul and Kurram rivers

[11] Saṃhitā is the mantra collection, Brāmaṇa consists of ritual commentaries, Āraṇyaka are wilderness texts, and the UpaniṣadUpaniṣad segment contains secret philosophical teachings learnt from a *guru* (teacher) (Witzel, 2005, 69).
[12] For many orthodox Hindus, the Veda are an important 'source of knowledge about religious and social duties in harmony with the natural universal order (*dharma*)' (Bartley, 2011, 7).
[13] A precise date of its composition is difficult to establish as there is an absence of material remains belonging to the composers of the *Ṛgveda* (the Āryas), and its hymns only represent a portion of the society and religion at that period (Jamison and Brereton, 2014, 6).
[14] The names of the poets or clans are often incorporated into the hymns as this their way of identifying the poem as their creation or property.

in present-day Afghanistan to the Ganges in the east' (Jamison and Brereton, 2014, 5). Based on this supposition, Jamison and Brereton have thus suggested that 'the earliest parts of the *Ṛgveda* were likely composed in the northwest, in the latest parts of the text the area has extended further into the subcontinent, and its center has shifted toward Kuruksetra, roughly the area of the modern state of Haryana' (2014, 5).

In addition to the hymns providing us with geographical information regarding their composition, we are also offered an insight into Vedic liturgies. The many verses (*ṛc*-) of the *Ṛgveda* praise the Vedic gods, tribal chieftains and ritualistic techniques, and were to be recited during sacrificial performances, i.e. *yãjna*.[15] They are also known to refer to myths, tell stories or speculate about the universe (Staal, 2008, 4). However, book ten (known as the book of additions) includes individual poems, Atharvavedic spells, and 'stanzas accompanying some major rites of passage (marriage, death)' (Witzel, 1997, 264). It thus appears as though this book deviates from the traditional arrangement of topics, although the variation could be a result of the tenth book being a later addition to the Rgvedic collection.

3.2. The Atharvaveda

The *Atharvaveda* (knowledge of the Atharvans) was composed ca. 900 BCE (Olson, 2016, 137) in the region of Kuru- Pañcāla. Although originally excluded from the Vedic corpus, it later became known as the fourth Veda. It exists in two recensions: the Paippalāda recension and the Śaunaka recension. The Paippalāda is the earliest version and was named after 'its teacher Pippalāda whose name is derived from *pippala*, the sacred fig tree' (Staal, 2008, 136). The Śaunaka is the later composition, and 'is less similar to the Rigveda' (Staal, 2008, 136).

[15] Agni and Soma are the two deities primarily associated with ritual and sacrificial performance. Agni is the sacrificial fire that consumes the offering. Soma is the juice extracted from the *soma* plant. When the drink is consumed, it is believed to bestow the consumer with immortality.

Each edition contains twenty books comprised of 760 hymns, and is considered a collection of magic spells and incantations composed by a special class of priests, the *atharvans*.

The various incantations predominantly involve sorcery in the form of white magic (i.e. exorcisms) or black magic (i.e. curses). However, they also include mystical hymns, various appendixes, and domestic (*gṛha*) or royal rituals (Witzel, 1997, 277-278). A large portion of the hymns are metrical in style, and they primarily focus on protection against disasters and demons (Michaels, 2004, 56). They are also known to deal with 'two major rites of passage, marriage and death' (Witzel, 1997, 275-276), as well as healing the sick. In the *Atharvaveda*, the art of healing is predominantly associated with the Vedic healers or the *bhiṣaj*s.[16]

3.3. The Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads are formally known as the last part of the Veda (lit. Vedānta) and they contain the esoteric knowledge imparted orally by a *guru* (teacher) to his disciple or student. This is shown in the etymology of the term: '[t]he prefix "*upa*," denotes "nearness"; *ni*, means "down," or "totality"; and *sad*, "to sit," "to attain," or "to loosen"' (Gupta, 2012, 30). The number of Upaniṣads composed is not known. However, there are said to be eleven major texts: '*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (BU), *Chāndogya* (CU), *Taittrīya* (TU), *Īśā*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka* (MU), *Māṇḍūkya* (MAU), *Śvetāśvatara* (*Śvetā*), and *Maitri*' (Gupta, 2012, 30). The dates of their composition range between ca. 600 BCE and 300 CE. The Upaniṣadic authors cannot be known as they were composed by various individuals, from different periods of history in different geographical locations. Accordingly, a precise date and geographical location of their composition cannot be ascertained. However, scholars such as Patrick Olivelle have reached the consensus that the '*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya* are the two earliest Upaniṣads'

[16] The *bhiṣajs* are also known as chanters (*kavi*) or shakers (*vipra*) for their incantations and dancing (Zysk, 2009, 8).

(Olivelle, 1998, 12). Further, Olivelle has also asserted that the 'three other early prose Upaniṣads – Taittrīya, Aitareya, and Kausītaki – come next … [and the] oldest is probably the Kaṭha, followed by Īśā, Śvetāśvatara, and Muṇḍaka' (Olivelle, 1998, 12-13).

Despite being composed within different eras and having varying perspectives to one another, the Upaniṣads 'all draw from a common stock of stories, dialogues, and metaphorical constructions involving famous kings and teachers from a broad geographical spread, covering the Gangetic plain from Kuru-Pancala in the west to Kosala-Videha in the east' (Patton, 2005, 46). Further, the concepts found within the Upaniṣads also appear to display contrasting ideas to Vedic society. Though the early texts continue to draw upon sacrificial activity and imagery concerning the cosmology of the places (*loka*) of the fathers, ancestors and gods, they 'attribute[…], through etymologies, different modes of being to each of the offerings and each of the worlds' (Patton, 2005, 47). Such change in attitude is said to be due to the influx of ideas attributed to the influence of Ājīvikism, Buddhism and Jainism.[17] In particular, the most predominant cultural, social and religious development evident in the later Upaniṣads is the shift away from *kárman* based on the performance of sacrificial activity, into the doctrine of *karma* concerned with rebirth as determined by one's deeds.[18]

3.4. Vision and possession in relation to Near-death Experiences

In early Vedic literature, death is conceptualised as leaving this world and joining the ancestors in the abode of the (fore)fathers (*pitṛloka*). In order to reach such place after death, the Vedic man must pay his threefold debt (*ṛnām*) to gods (*deva*), to sages (*ṛṣi*) and to ancestors (*pitṛ*) by means of sacrifice (*yajña*):

[17] For more information regarding this culmination of ideas that took place in Greater Magadha, see Bronkhorst (2007).
[18] For a more detailed discussion see Tull (1989).

> [a] *brahman*, at his very birth, is born with a triple debt – of studentship to the seers, of sacrifice to the gods, of offspring to the fathers. He is, indeed, free from debt, who has a son, is a sacrificer, and who has lived as a student (TS 6.3.10.5)[19]

Through the correct performance of *yajña*, the Vedic man obtains his place with the *pitṛ*. However, by failing to perform sacrificial obligations, one obtains a bad *loka* (Smith, 1985, 302) and becomes a voyager (*preta*): he remains a dead man on his journey to the *pitṛloka*. Thus, in Vedic tradition, one's state in the afterlife is ultimately determined by ritual activity.

In the Vedic tradition, death is also closely associated with illness and disease. If an individual becomes ill, they were said to have suffered the attack of a demon.[20] This is because 'disease was believed to be produced by demonic or malevolent forces when they attacked and entered the bodies of their victims, causing the manifestation of morbid bodily conditions' (Zysk, 1998, 15). An attack of this nature would take place if an individual committed a taboo such as disregarding social conventions, performing witchcraft or sorcery, and committing execrations towards the gods. It was thus the duty of the *bhiṣaj*s, or Vedic healers, to restore the individual back to health after suffering an attack of a god (Zysk, 2009, 8).[21] Accordingly, mythological narratives concerned with the attack of a deity, and healing narratives concerned with the restoration of an individual's health after suffering such attack, form a significant part of Vedic literature, particularly within the *Atharvaveda.*

After discussing concepts of death, illness and disease, it is evident that the Vedic tradition considered these aspects to be closely associated with one another. More specifically, these aspects also have a close relationship with NDEs. This is because a NDE arises from the

[19] Quotation is translated by Keith (1914).
[20] During the Vedic period a demon was also believed to be a deity.
[21] Although the *bhiṣajs* were a vital aspect of Vedic society, they were believed to be impure because of their dealings with ill individuals, as well as their association with individuals from outside of Vedic society (Zysk, 1999, 2).

circumstances of death, illness and disease. However, they are also shown to occur when an individual is sleeping or has consumed an intoxicant, namely *soma*.

An example of a NDE occurring whilst sleeping can be witnessed in RV.10.135:

> 1. [Boy:] The leafy tree where Yama holds symposium with the gods, toward there the clanlord, our father, follows the track of the ancient ones.
>
> 2. [Boy:] Him following the track of the ancient ones, wandering along yonder evil way, did I keep looking for reluctantly, but I was longing for him again.
>
> 3. [Father?:] The new chariot without wheels that you made with your mind, lad, the one that has a single shaft but faces in all directions—without seeing it, you mount it.
>
> 4. [Father?:] The chariot which you, lad, sent rolling forth from the inspired poets, following it the sāman melody rolled forth from here, set onto a boat.
>
> 5. [Yama? Poet?:] Who begat the lad? Who sent the chariot rolling out? Who could tell us this today, how the (debt) came to be forgiven?
>
> 6. As (the debt) came to be forgiven, after that the top was born; the base was stretched out in front and the "coming forth" was made behind.
>
> 7. Here is the seat of Yama, which is called the palace of the gods. Here is his pipe blown; here is he adorned with hymns.

This passage represents the boy having a NDE whilst sleeping as he experiences two features specifically related to this phenomenon: 1) encountering a deceased family member or loved one, which is when the boy encounters his deceased father in his dream; and 2) encountering a religious figure, which for the boy is seeing Yama and the place where he resides. In particular, it is interesting to note that RV.10.135.7 refers to the seat of Yama and the hymns which can be heard throughout his kingdom. Such details are significant as they enable us to identify connections between the mythology of Yama and what this boy is said to experience; and they emphasise the boy's explanation of this phenomenon, whilst he also correctly identifies particular attributes of Yama's kingdom.

Another likely NDE can be observed in RV.9.112, although this occurrence is associated with the consumption of *soma*:

1. Let Indra, Vṛtra-smasher, drink the soma in the reed-filled (place), placing strength in himself as he is about to perform a great heroic deed.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

2. Purify yourself, o master of the directions, o muni cent Soma, from the foamy (place).
With real words of truth, with trust, and with fervor are you pressed.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

3. The buffalo grown strong through Parjanya [=thunder]—him [=rain] the Daughter of the Sun brought,
him the Gandharvas received, him they placed as the juice in the soma.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

4. Speaking the truth, you whose brilliance is the truth, speaking what is real, you whose actions are real,
speaking your trust, King Soma, you are prepared by the Placer, o Soma.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

5. Of (you) who are lofty and really strong the joint streams stream jointly.
The juices of (you) who are rich in juice join together as (you) are being purified by the sacred formulation, tawny one.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

6. Where, o self-purifying one, the formulator, speaking metrical speech along with the pressing stone, makes himself great on soma, generating joy with soma—
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

7. Where the inexhaustible light is, in which world the sun is placed,
in that one place me, o self-purifying one, in the immortal, imperishable world.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

8. Where the son of Vivasvant is king, where there is a ladder down from heaven, where those youthfully exuberant waters are, there make me immortal.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

9. Where one can move following one's desire in the three-vaulted, three-heavened (place) of heaven, where there are worlds fillled with light, there make me immortal. – O drop, ow around for Indra.

10. Where there are desires and yearnings, where the upper surface of the coppery one [=Sun and soma?] is,
where there is independence and satisfaction, there make me immortal.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

11. Where joys and delights, elations and exaltations dwell,
where the desires of desire are obtained, there make me immortal.
– O drop, ow around for Indra.

In this hymn, it appears as though an individual has consumed *soma*, and it is through this intoxicant that they have a brief vision of Yama's realm. As noted by Gregory Shushan,

'Yamaloka is adorned by days, waters and nights' (2009, 92), and it is these aspects of Yama's abode which are clearly referred to throughout this passage. Furthermore, Shushan also points out that 'the celestial and subterranean worlds are associated with each other' (2009, 92), and it is through Soma that one can 'see the light of heaven and […] the sun' (2009, 92). Thus, the individual who has consumed *soma* in this hymn is describing their vision of the yonder worlds. Additionally, I would also like to briefly draw upon the analogy in verse 9.112.10. Although 'the upper surface of the coppery one' is suggested to be the sun and *soma*, I would like to propose that this may reflect the coppery gates said to be in Yama's kingdom. Although the gates are not explicitly alluded to in Vedic literature, this reference to the 'surface of the coppery one' may be a precursor of what is to later develop and become fully established as a feature of Yamaloka in later literature, i.e. the coppery gates unambiguously described in the Purāṇas.

In the *Atharvaveda*, NDEs are primarily associated with the healing of an individual, and invocations that attempt to stop the individual from encountering Yama. For example, AV 5.30 is evidence of healing meant as avoiding Yama. However, it also appears to represent an ill or diseased individual's encounter with death, and thus their NDE:

> 1. From near thy vicinity, from near thy distance (do I call): remain here, do not follow; do not follow the Fathers of yore! Firmly do I fasten thy life's breath.
>
> 2. Whatever sorcery any kinsman or stranger has practised against thee, both release and deliverance with my voice do I declare for thee.
>
> 3. If thou hast deceived or cursed a woman or a man in thy folly, both release and deliverance with my voice do I declare for thee.
>
> 4. If thou liest (ill) in consequence of a sin committed by thy mother or thy father, both release and deliverance with my voice do I declare for thee.
>
> 5. Fight shy of the medicine which thy mother and thy father, thy sister and thy brother let out against thee: I shall cause thee to live unto old age!
>
> 6. Remain here, O man, with thy entire soul; do not follow the two messengers of Yama: come to the abodes of the living!
>
> 7. Return when called, knowing the outlet of the path (death), the ascent, the

advance, the road of every living man!

8. Fear not, thou shalt not die: I shall cause thee to live unto old age! I have charmed away from thy limbs the disease that wastes the limbs.

9. The disease that racks and wastes thy limbs, and the sickness in thy heart, has flown as an eagle to a far distance, overcome by my charm.

10. The two sages Alert and Watchful, the sleepless and the vigilant, these two guardians of thy life's breath, are awake both day and night.

11. Agni here is to be revered; the sun shall rise here for thee: rise thou from deep death, yea from black darkness!

12. Reverence be to Yama, reverence to death; reverence to the Fathers and to those that lead (to them) [death's messengers?]! That Agni who knows the way to save do I engage for this man, that he be exempt from harm!

13. His breath shall come, his soul shall come, his sight shall come, and, too, his strength! His body shall collect itself: then shall he stand firm upon his feet!

14. Unite him, Agni, with breath and sight, provide him with a body and with strength! Thou hast a knowledge of immortality: let him not now depart, let him not now become a dweller in a house of clay!

15. Thy in−breathing shall not cease, thy outbreathing shall not vanish; Sûrya (the sun), the supreme lord, shall raise thee from death with his rays!

16. This tongue (of mine), bound (in the mouth, yet) mobile, speaks within: with it I have charmed away disease, and the hundred torments of the takman (fever).

17. This world is most dear to the gods, unconquered. For whatever death thou wast destined when thou wast born, O man, that (death) and we call after thee: do not die before old age! (AV 5.30.1-17)[22]

Although this passage does not explicitly provide details of the NDE, the individual who is invoking this healing prayer clearly states that the ill person is encountering death and refers to Yama's associates: the two dogs and his messengers. A similar encounter with death can also be witnessed in AV.8.1. To begin with, verses 8-18 appear to describe the bringing back of an individual from death, and they also implicitly refer to the individual's NDE by drawing upon certain elements and characteristics, i.e. Yama's dogs, the road to Yama's realm and the darkness:

[22] Translated by Bloomfield (1897).

8. Do not regard *(ā-dhī)* the departed, who lead [one] to the distance; ascend out of darkness, come to light; we take hold on thy hands.

9. Let not the dark and the brindled one, sent forth, [seize] thee, that are Yama's dogs, road-defenders; come thou hitherward; do not hesitate; stand not there with mind averted.

10. Do not follow that road; that is a frightful one – the one thou hast not gone before, that I speak of; to that darkness, O man, do not go forth; [there is] fear in the distance, safety for thee hitherward.

11. Let the fires that are within the waters defend thee; let that defend thee which himan beings kindle; let Vāiçvānara, Jātavedas defend [thee]; let not [the fire] of heaven consume thee along with the lighting.

12. Let not the flesh-eating [fire] plot against thee; move far from the destroying *sáṃkasuka*) one; let heaven defend, let earth defend thee; let both sun and moon defend thee; let the atmosphere defend from the god's missile.

13. Let both the knower and the attender defend thee; let both the sleepless one and the unslumbering one defend thee; let both the guardian and the wakeful one protect thee.

14. Let these defend thee; let these guard thee; to these [be] homage! to these hail!

15. Let Vāyu, Indra, Dhātar, the preserving Savitar, assign thee unto converse with the living; let not breath, strength, leave thee; we call after thy life.

16. Let not the jaw-snapping (?) grinder *(jambhá)*, let not the darkness find thee, let not the tongue-wrencher (?); how shouldst thou be one that perisheth? up let the Ādityas, the Vasus bear thee, up let Indra-and-Agni, for thy welfare.

17. Up hath heaven, up hath earth, up hath Prajāpati caught thee; up out of death have the herbs, with Soma for their kind, made thee pass.

18. Be this man just here, O gods; let him not go yonder from hence; him by what is of thousand-fold might do we make pass up out of death.[23]

The latter verses (19-21) explicitly state that the individual has returned from death:

19. I have made thee pass up out of death; let the vigor-givers blow together; let not the women of dishevelled locks, let not the evil-wailers, wail for thee.

20. I have taken, I have found thee; thou hast come back renewed; whole-limbed one! I have found thy whole sight, and thy whole life-time.

[23] Translated by Whitney (1905).

> 21. It hath shone out for thee; it hath become light; darkness hath departed from thee; away from thee we set down death [and] perdition, away the *yákṣma*.[24]

Although this passage does not specifically refer to an encounter with Yama, nor does it provide an account of the NDE from the individual themselves, it draws on the experience of the meeting. The individual is said to encounter Yama's messengers and darkness before being returned to their life and light. Thus, they had a brush with death in which they experienced features known to occur whilst having a NDE: encountering Yama's messengers.

In the Upaniṣads, the relationship between Yama and death is alluded to in clearer terms, and NDEs seem to address the emergent concepts within these textual sources. Unlike Vedic *kárman*, which is concerned with sacrificial activity, the emergent *karma* doctrine in Upaniṣadic literature not only discusses concepts such as the cycle of rebirth (*sāṃsara*) and liberation (*mokṣa*) from it depending on one's deeds, but it also conceptualises death as a necessary passage within this cycle. Such notion is apparent in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* which first describes a conversation between a father (Vajasravas) and son (Naciketas) before moving on to a lengthy dialect between Naciketas and Death (Yama).

After seeing his father giving away cows as sacrificial gifts, Naciketas (the son), asked: 'to whom will you give me?' (KaU 1.4). He then repeated the question for a second and third time, before a frustrated Vajasravas yelled: 'I'll give you to Death' (KaU 1.4). At this point, Naciketas travels to Yama's realm:

[NACIKETAS *reflects*]	I go as the very first of many. I go as the middlemost of many. What's it that Yama must do, That he will do with me today?
[A VOICE]	Look ahead! See how they have gone, those who have gone before us! Look back! So will they go, those who will come after us. A mortal man ripens like grain, And like grain he is born again.

[24] Translated by Whitney (1905).

A Brahmin guest enters a house
as the fire in all men.
Bring water, O Vaivasvata,
that is how they appease him.

Hopes and expectations, fellowship and goodwill,
Children and livestock, rites and gifts—
all these a Brahmin wrests from the foolish man,
in whose house he resides without any food. (KaU 1.5-8)[25]

After this journey, Naciketas then passes over to death and reaches Yama's house. On his return, Yama engages in a lengthy conversation with Naciketas, offering him three wishes for recompense (see Appendix A).

Once Naciketas rejects all the desires offered to him, Yama then imparts the highest knowledge, i.e. the nature of *ātman* (soul), the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), and liberation (*mokṣa*) (KaU 2-6.18). Moreover, although it could be said that this dialogue is not strictly a representation of a NDE - because Naciketas does not return from death but instead attains *mokṣa* - it is important to recognise the significance of the passage when attempting to identify and understand NDEs in Upaniṣadic literature.

This passage is representative of two features relating to NDEs. The first is a brief reflection of Naciketas' journey to Yama's realm, which is exemplified in the beginning of the passage (verses 5-8). At this point, we can see that when Naciketas is near-death, he has the ability to reflect upon the experience and events that he will encounter when he reaches Yama. This is particularly prominent when Naciketas questions: 'What's it that Yama must do, [t]hat he will do with me today?' (KaU 1.5). The second significant feature is the lengthy dialogue between Yama and Naciketas. For some, this conversation may be understood to take place when Naciketas has passed over. For others, this dialogue may have commenced when Naciketas is at the point of death, which would specifically categorise this dialogue as a NDE. However, I find that the actual timing of the occurrence is not perhaps as relevant as first

[25] All quotations from the Upaniṣads are taken from Olivelle (1998).

thought. Indeed, it would be more beneficial to consider the relevance of the conversation in relation to NDEs. With this is mind, when drawing upon the occurrence of the dialogue, we can see that when Naciketas is either near death or has passed over, he meets with Yama and is able to discuss what happens after death: a key concept that emerges, and is reflected upon, within the Upaniṣads. Further, it is also noteworthy that despite the actual timing of this conversation, Naciketas at some point of death had a detailed encounter with Yama. For him, this experience was extremely beneficial as he was able to attain liberation through his action (i.e. not accepting the materialistic desires offered to him by Yama) and his attainment of knowledge (i.e. that which is provided to him by Yama), which, again, is a key notion developed within Upaniṣadic literature.[26]

3.5. Discussion and Analysis.

After looking at these passages from the Veda and Upaniṣads, it seems acceptable to argue that the visions and possessions described therein are near-death experiences. Not only do they confirm circumstances associated with NDEs (such as being close to death, returning from death, or having this experience after the consumption of drugs, having an illness or disease, or during periods of rest, i.e. sleeping), but they also include the distinctive cultural features associated to a NDE (such as encountering a religious figure or deceased love one and the feeling of dying). Moreover, in the Vedic tradition, the NDEs involve an encounter with Yama or his messengers (primarily the two dogs), or an encounter with a deceased family member. Such experiences appear to be based upon the Vedic belief of joining Yama's abode where the *pitṛ* reside following one's death.

[26] It could also be surmised that if Naciketas wished so, he could have returned to the world of the living. This is suggested when Death states: 'And if you would think this is an equal wish—You may choose wealth together with a long life; Achieve prominence, Naciketas, in this wide world; And I will make you enjoy your desires at will' (KaU1.24). If this supposition was accurate, Naciketas could have returned to the world of the living after his NDE, only if he had taken this as his third wish.

Conversely, Upaniṣadic NDEs appear to have altered in line with the cultural developments that took place, as they draw upon the belief of rebirth and liberation. Such notion is characterised throughout Naciketas' conversation with Yama, as Yama not only teaches Naciketas what happens after death, but he also discusses how to attain liberation. Further, the Upaniṣadic NDE is similar to the Vedic NDE in the way that they both refer to an encounter with Yama. However, the former experience also includes the feeling of dying: another feature explicitly connected to NDEs. This aspect of a NDE is symbolised when Naciketas reflects upon his death and journey to Yama's realm in KaU 1.5.

After identifying early notions of NDEs as found in Vedic and Upaniṣadic literature, I will now move on to discuss NDEs in Post-Vedic and Classical India by drawing upon passages from the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas.

Chapter 4

Post-Vedic and Classical India: *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas

The *Māhabhārata* (the great [story] of Bharata's descendants) is generally referred to as Itihāsa (so it has been or history) and is one of the great epics of India, along with the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is the longest extant epic poem, consisting of eighteen books with one hundred thousand verses, and is attributed to the mythical sage Vyāsa, who is also believed to have authored the Purāṇas. A precise date of its composition cannot be given. However, it is likely that the 'ancient oral traditions of *Bhārata* epic were transformed into oral traditions of a Pāndava *Bhārata* epic that circulated in ancient North India between approximately 350BCE and 50CE' (Fitzgerald, 2015). Then, over time, the 'Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was fixed and promulgated in Northern India between about 300 and 450CE' (Fitzgerald, 2005, 52). As this time frame follows that of the Vedic period and accommodates the arrival of Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvikism, the *Mahābhārata* 'reveal[s] much about the process by which the more theistic emphases of classical Hinduism emerged from late Vedic ritualism' (Brockington, 2005, 116). Such change is conveyed not only through the tales of the heroic deeds of human beings, but also within narratives on *dharma* (Doniger, 2015, 129). Further, these narratives within the *Mahābhārata* also reflect religious concepts belonging to the *śramaṇic* religions (Maas, 2016, 6), namely the belief in rebirth and karmic consequences.

In particular, the *Mahābhārata* narratives tell 'of the mutual alienation and then bitter and annihilating war between the Bharata pharities of the Pāndava "heroes" and the Kaurava "villains", and their myriad allies' (Fitzgerald, 2015). In addition to this central narrative are other tales that also each contribute to the larger plot; the most-well known of these being the *Bhagavadgītā*. Such narratives primarily focus on the duty (*dharma*) of the warriors (*kṣatriya*). However, as noted by Simon Brodbeck, the *Mahābhārata* also draws upon ancestor worship and 'a soteriology based upon having patrilineal descendants and receiving regular memorial-

cum-alimentary offerings from them, enabling continued postmortem existence in a *pitṛloka* (ancestral heaven)' (2011, 84).[27] Yet, Brodbeck further highlights that the *Mahābhārata* is not confined to this soteriological tradition as there is another 'whereby one travels not the path of the fathers but the path of the gods, attaining *mokṣa* (freedom, release) and never needing to take birth again' (2011, 85). Such notion not only portrays the concept of *saṃsāra*, but it also incorporates the doctrine of *karma* (lit. action), a concept that is fully developed in the Purāṇas.

The Purāṇas (ancient [narratives]) are a distinct genre of literature that deal with important Hindu customs and rites through their encyclopaedic form.[28] They were originally composed in Sanskrit by anonymous authors, they form part of *smṛti* (recollection), and they are read and heard by all Hindus today.[29] According to the Brahmanic Sanskrit tradition, there are eighteen major Purāṇas (Mahāpurāṇas) and countless sub-Purāṇas (Upapurānas).[30] The names of the Mahāpurānas tend to vary. However, scholars such as Velcheru Rao tend to list the eighteen as: '*Bhāgvata*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Matsya*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Brahma*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Viṣṇu*, *Varāha*, *Vāmana*, *Vāyu*, *Agni*, *Nārada*, *Padma*, *Liṅga*, *Garuḍa*, *Kūrma*, and *Skanda*' (Rao, 2005, 101).[31] A precise date of their composition cannot be established. Some scholars place their configuration 'back to the early centuries of the Common Era' (Bailey, 2015), or between 250CE and 1350CE (Doniger, 2014, 233), whereas others avoid dating Purāṇic literature as they state that speaking of a specific date is meaningless.[32]

The Purāṇas have five distinctive qualities or characteristic topics (*pañcalakṣaṇa*): 1) the creation of the universe, or cosmogony; 2) destruction of the worlds or secondary creation;

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[27] Such notion is portrayed 'in the *Māhabhārata* on two occasions [where] we find scenes in which ancestors, endangered by the celibacy or childlessness of their crucial descendant, hang upside-down in a hole in the ground, and plead with their descendant to save them by having children (Brodbeck, 2011, 84).
[28] This includes myths, pilgrimages, rites of passage, death, ritual etc.
[29] Although they were composed by anonymous authors, tradition holds Vyāsa as the composer of all Purāṇas.
[30] As Wendy Doniger has highlighted, the Purāṇas are not confined to the stated eighteen as there several hundred vernacular and Jaina Purāṇas also in existence (1993).
[31] According to Rao, a mnemonic device provided in the oral tradition refers to these as the eighteen Mahāpurāṇas: bha-dvayam ma dvayam caiva bra-trayam va-cutuṣṭayam a-nā-pa-liṅ-ga-kū-skanī purāṇāni pracakṣyate (Rao, 2005, 101).
[32] Cf. Rocher, 1986, 103; and Hardy, 1983, 486.

3) Genealogy of patriarchs and gods; 4) Reigns of the Manus; and 5) a preserved history of the ruling dynasties to modern times (Wilson, 1961, iv). However, scholars differ over their meanings and significance. For some, the *pañcalakṣaṇa* represent the contents of Purāṇic literature as a complete genre (Matchett, 2005, 136), and for others, they indicate the original 'nature of the Purāṇas in their […] earliest form' (Hazra, 1987, 5). The latter understanding of the *pañcalakṣaṇa* is significant in the way that it suggests we can determine the original sections of the Purāṇas by identifying those that feature the five qualities. Tradition held that the Purāṇas must be rewritten in order to attain their authority and to reflect society (Hazra, 1987, 6), and it is for this reason that we cannot ascertain the amount of original work contained in Purāṇic literature. Yet, the additions and amendments made are significant aspects of the Purāṇas as they enable us to reflect upon the cultural and socio-religious context at the time of their composition, i.e. the inclusion of Buddhist iconography, mantras and rituals (Doniger, 2015, 221), and the idea of devotional worship (*bhakti*). Moreover, the ability to adapt to the cultural and religious beliefs of society is most likely the reason why this popular genre of literature reflects upon the core beliefs and concerns of Hindus today, including that of *karma* and its relationship with one's death.

4.1. Vision and possession in relation to Near-death Experiences.

In the *Mahābhārata* and in Purāṇic literature, death is closely associated to one's *dharma* (the law or duty one should abide to) and *karma*. Although the *dharma* advocated in the *Mahābhārata* is primarily one designed for *kṣatriya*s, the Purāṇas discuss the duty of all Hindus as this concept is presented within the framework of *varṇāśramadharma*.[33] Each *varṇa* (caste or class) - *brāhmaṇa*s (priests), *kṣatriya*s (warriors and rulers), *vaiśya* (mercantile and

[33] Though the *Māhabhārata* is primarily concerned with *kṣatriya-dharma*, it also introduces the idea of *svadharma* (personal law) which is determined by the individual's sex, *āśrama* and or *varṇā* (Fitzgerald, 2004, 679).

agricultural classes), and *śūdra* (servants, labourers) - has a specific duty to fulfil depending also upon gender, age and stage of life. A male individual belonging to a twice-born (*dvija*) class (the first three *varṇa*s) passes through different stages of life (*āśrama*) - student, householder, hermit and renunciant – in his pursue to fulfil *dharma*.[34] In both the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇic texts, one produces good *karma* by fulfilling their specific *dharma*. Conversely, one who does not respect his duty produces bad *karma*, thus living by *adharma* (that which is not in accordance with the law).[35] The *karma* produced then determines rebirth: one who has performed righteous deeds will be reborn at a higher level whereas one who has not most often endures punishment in the context of hell and a lower rebirth.[36] On this basis, *karma* is a system of consequence concerned with one's ethical deeds.

The doctrine of *karma* is also closely associated with the circumstance of one's death, i.e. the illness one sustains. As explained by Anthony Cerulli:

> when people act in the world, they create forces on others and objects around them, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes on purpose; the objects and people who are affected by the force of a person's actions subsequently exert a counterforce of equal measure, but in the opposite direction. This cycle of cause and effect both stems from the individual and returns to the individual. Health or lack of health … depends on the ethical quality and religious property (or dharma) of the actions and behaviours (or karma) that people produce in society (2012, 51).

Accordingly, a large portion of Indian literature, especially Āyurveda, attributes health, ill-health and death to one's past *karmic* deeds.[37] If one abides to their *dharma* and produces good *karma*, they will be rewarded with good health and long life. However, one who does not act in accordance with their duty will incur in ill-health through illness as a result of their actions contrary to *dharma*.

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[34] The *dvija* are those belonging to the three upper classes.
[35] Cf. *Brahma Purāṇa*. 217.1-16 and *Bhagavadgītā*. 3.35.
[36] Cf. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. 10.88-92.
[37] Cf. CaS. *Cikitsāsthāna* 3.14–25; the myth of Lady Opulence in KaS. *Kalpasthāna* 6.7-8; and MāP 51.100-106.

After discussing the concepts of death, illness and disease in post-Vedic literature, it is evident that these conditions are closely associated with one's *dharma* and karmic deeds. However, death, illness and disease also appear to be connected to NDEs as such circumstances produce this phenomenon. For this reason, it could be suggested that one's NDE is determined by one's *karma*. An example of such notion can be observed in the tale of Sāvitrī from the *Mahābhārata* (3.42b).

The narrative tells of prince Satyavat who is flawed by imminent death. In the meantime, Sāvitrī, the daughter of King Aśvapati, must find a husband and chooses to marry Satyavat despite his short life expectancy. As she knows death is near, Sāvitrī performs a three-day vow (*vrata*) of standing up all day and night. After doing so, she then goes into the forest with her husband to split some wood. Satyavat develops a headache and rests on Sāvitrī's lap. At this point, Yama appears before Sāvitrī:

> In a little while she saw a person in a yellow robe and a turban. a handsome man resplendent like the sun, smoothly black and red-eyed. He had a noose in his hand and looked terrifying as he stood at Satyavat's side and looked down on him. When she saw him she put down her husband's head gently and rose up at once. She folded her hands and said piteously, with trembling heart, "I know that thou art a God, for thy form is not human. Tell me, if it pleases thee, who art thou, God, and what dost thou seek here?"
>
> *Yama said:*
> You are a devoted wife, Sāvitrī, and possess the power of austerities. Therefore I will reply to you-know that I am Yama, good woman. The life of your husband the Prince Satyavat has run out. I shall fetter him and take him along-that is what I seek to do.
>
> *Mārkaṇḍeya said:*
> Having said this, the blessed lord, the King of the Ancestors proceeded to reveal his entire design exactly as a kindness to her: "This man is possessed of the Law, beautiful, and a sea of virtues. Therefore he does not deserve to be fetched by my familiars, hence I have come myself."
> Thereupon Yama forcibly drew from Satyavat's body a thumb-sized person, who was fettered with the noose and in his power. The body gave up its spirit, its breathing stopped, its sheen faded, and it became motionless and not pleasing to watch. Having tied him, Yama set out to the south, and Sāvitrī followed sorrowfully, this stately, devoted wife, perfected by her stressful vow.

Yama said:
Go, Sāvitrī, return! Perform his obsequies. You are acquitted of all debts to your husband. You have gone as far as you can go! (Mbh.3.(42).279.5-20).[38]

After being told by Yama that she must remain to the world of the living, Sāvitrī speaks words of knowledge and wisdom. Hearing such words, Yama is pleased and grants her a boon. Sāvitrī asks for her father-in-law's sight to be returned. Yama then grants her wish, and again asks Sāvitrī to return. However, Sāvirtrī remains reluctant to leave her husband and this scenario repeats four more times. As for the remaining four boons, Sāvitrī asks for: her father-in-law to reign his kingdom again; her father to have a hundred sons to continue his line; a hundred mighty and gallant sons born from her womb by Satyavat; and that Satyavat may live. Yama agrees to grant these boons, and once this has been done, Yama allows Satyavat and Sāvitrī to return to the world of the living:

Mārkaṇḍeya said:
So be it, said Yama Vaivasvata, and he loosened the nooses. Then the king of the Law said to Savitri with a joyous heart, "Look, good woman, joy of your family, I have freed your husband. Take him with you; he is healthy and shall succeed in his purposes. He shall attain with you to a lifetime of four hundred years; and, after having offered up sacrifices, he shall win fame in the world for his Law. Satyavat shall beget on you a hundred sons, and they shall all be barons and kings and have sons and grandsons. Your names shall forever be famous on earth. Your father shall have a hundred sons by your mother Malavi, named the Malavas, which, with their sons and grandsons, shall continue forever. They shall be your baronial brothers, the likes of the Thirty."
Having thus bestowed boons on her, the majestic King of the Law turned Savitri back and went to his own house. When Yama had gone, Savitri took hold of her husband and returned to the place where her husband's corpse was lying. Seeing him there on the ground, she approached her husband, embraced him, lifted his head in her lap, and sat on the ground. Satyavat returned to consciousness, and he said to Savitri, looking at her lovingly again and again, as one who has returned from a journey:

Satyavat said:
Why, I have slept a long time! Why did you not wake me up? And where is that black person who dragged me from here?

[38] All quotations from the Mahābhārata's tale of Sāvitrī are translated by van Buitenen (1975).

Savitri said:
Yes, you have slept a long time in my lap, bull among men. The blessed lord Yama, the God who subdues the creatures, is gone. You are rested now, my lord prince, and your sleep has gone. If you can, stand up, see, night has fallen. (Mbh.3.(42).281.55-65).

Once Satyavat fully regains consciousness, he recalls his own near-death experience:

Mārkaṇḍeya said:
Having regained consciousness, Satyavat arose as from a pleasant sleep, and looking in all directions at the woods, he said: "I went out with you, my fine-waisted woman, to gather fruit. Then as I was splitting wood I got a headache. And because of the pain in my head was unable to stand up anymore and fell asleep in your lap. All this I remember, my lovely. I lost consciousness when I fell asleep in your embrace, then I saw a terrible darkness and an august person. Tell me, my pretty, if you know, whether it was a dream I saw, or was it real? (Mbh.3.(42).281.66-71).

The passage explicitly draws upon Sāvitrī's NDE. This is portrayed in terms of a detailed description of Yama and a lengthy dialogue between Sāvitrī and the God of Death himself. At this point, we also know that Satyavat has died and is fettered by Yama's noose: the noose being another feature unambiguously related to Indian NDEs. However, the passage continues, and as a result of her *karma*, Sāvitrī is granted her boons and returns to the corpse of her husband: by living a pious life and performing austerities, Sāvitrī's deeds produced good *karma*. Sāvirtrī's vision of Yama ceases and Satyavat returns to life. Then, Satyavat depicts his version of events and thus his own NDE.

Unlike Sāvirtrī's encounter with death, which appears to be a vision and conversation with Yama produced by his visitation, Satyavat's NDE is described within the framework of a dream: another circumstance that NDEs are known to arise from. Further, Satyavat's NDE also appears to be determined by his *karma* and observance of *dharma*. This is demonstrated by the fact that Yama comes to take possession of Satyavat's soul personally, as the latter lived in accordance to his own *dharma* and produced good *karma*. For this reason, Satyavat dreamt about the Lord of the Dead. However, if Satyavat did not live a righteous life, his life would be

considered *adharmic*, and his soul would have been retrieved by Yama's messengers. If this had been the instance, I propose that Satyavat would most likely have dreamt about Yama's messengers. Ultimately, this narrative not only tells of two different NDEs, but it also suggests that the deeds one performs in this life affect the NDE one encounters.

Another example of a NDE can be observed in the *Skandapurāṇa* (6.139.1-64), in a section called the 'Greatness of Dharmarājeśvara'. In this tale, a Brāhmaṇa (Upādhyāya) loses his five-year-old son to death prematurely. In his grief, 'he took some water in his hand … [and] pronounced a terrible curse on Dharmarāja' (SkP 6.139.7).[39] After hearing the curse, Yama became grief stricken and went to the abode of Brahmā. There he spoke to Pitāmaha, and told of how he performed his duties without error but still incurred a curse. Although Brahmā could not alter a Brāhmaṇas curse, Brahmā created 'one hundred [and] eight ailments with *vāta* (wind), *pitta* (bile) and *kapha* (phlegm) as their causes' (SkP 6.139.23) in order to solve Yama's predicament. Pitāmaha told Yama that when an individual reaches the end of their life-span, he must send the ailments to take their life. However, it is also made clear that the ailments must 'regularly ask Citragupta and go to the earth for taking away the life of people when the proper time arrives' (SkP 6.139.32). In this way, the ailments would not take life prematurely, and Yama could not be blamed and would remain sinless when carrying out his duty. Once Yama received this instruction, he 'assumed the guise of Brāhmaṇa, took the (recently dead) son of the Brāhmaṇa and went to his beautiful abode' (SkP.6.139.35). At this point, the son returns to life and reunites with his father and mother:

> On seeing his own son coming to the house along with the wise Dharmarāja in the form of a Brāhmaṇa he went to them face-to-face with a delighted heart accompanied by his wife, saying "My son! My son!"
>
> He embraced him repeatedly and sniffed his head. With tears agitating his eyes he spoke these words:

[39] All quotations from the *Skandapurāṇa* are translated by Tagare (1958).

The Brāhmaṇa said:
O my son, how have you come back from that abode of Yama, from where not even a powerful person can return after going?
Is this some sort of jugglery happening near me? Is this a dream? Is this a perversion of my vision?
Who is this Brāhmaṇa standing by your side, dear son. He is endowed with divine refulgence. O my son, bow down to him.

The son said:
This is Yama himself who has come in the form of a Brāhmaṇa. Knowing that you are grief-stricken, he has become sympathetic and he has come for taking me with.
Hence, father, let him withdraw the curse of you consider me your darling. He has come to your house with great friendliness.
Then the excellent Brāhmaṇa bowed down to him and remained with face turned downwards due to shame. Then he spoke respectfully:

The Brāhmaṇa said:
Today my life has become fruitful. My life has become excellent, since I have regained my son who had gone to the abode of Yama. (SkP.6.139.36-45).

After the son returned to the world of the living he lived a long and fulfilled life:

Sūta said:
He promised "Let it be so". Then Yama joyously went to his world and resumed his duty.
That son of the Brāhmaṇa erected an excellent palace. In the centre, he installed the idol with great devotion by means of Mantra uttered by his father and duly propitiated by Yama.
He begot sons and grandsons in plenty. He lived on the earth for a long time and then passed away.
Thus what was heard by me from the Purāṇa has been narrated by you. One who recites this on the fifth lunar day with devotion shall never die prematurely. He will never suffer grief due to the loss of a son. (SkP.6.139.61-64).

In this passage, the son has a NDE as he not only visits Yama's abode, but he also returns back to life after having an encounter with Yama – all specific features of this phenomenon. Moreover, it would be difficult to assert that this was not a NDE as the narrative explicitly states at numerous points that the son returned to life after being recently dead: 1) the father expresses his bewilderment of his son returning to life; 2) the son states how Yama brought him back to life after he became sympathetic; and 3) Sūta describes the long life the son had lived after he had returned from death and Yama's abode.

Another interesting aspect of this passage is that verse 139.23 draws upon the idea of ailments aiding Yama in taking an individual's life. In particular, when discussing the ailments taking life, the verse also alludes to the fact that *karma* plays a role when deciding who will become ill or diseased. This assumption is based on the reference to Citragupta. As Citragupta keeps record of all just and unjust deeds performed by individuals, he knows which individual should sustain an ailment and when they should sustain it. Thus, Citragupta sends the ailments to consume those individuals who have accrued bad *karma*. Such notion is also explained briefly in the early verses of chapter one in the *Sāroddhāra* of *Gāruḍapurāṇa*, a text composed by Navanidhirāma and used specifically at funeral ceremonies, when Sūta begins to describe 'the fear-inspiring Way of Yama … [and] the afflictions of this world and the other' (GaP.1.4-5)[40]:

> Those men who are intent upon wisdom go to the highest goal; the sinfully-inclined go miserably to the torments of Yama.
> Listen how the misery of this world accrues to the sinful, then how they, having passed through death, meet with torments.
> Having experienced the good or the bad actions, in accordance with his former earning, - then, as the result of his actions, some disease arises.
> Powerful death, unexpectedly, like a serpent, approaches him stricken with bodily and mental pain, yet anxiously hoping to live.
> Not yet tired of this life, being cared for by his dependents, with his body deformed through old age, nearing death, in the house,
> He remains, like a house-dog, eating what is ungraciously placed before him, diseased, with failing digestion, eating little, moving little,
> With eyes turned up through loss of vitality, with tubes obstructed by phlegm, exhausted by coughing and difficult breathing, with the death rattle in his throat,
> Lying encircled by his sorrowing relatives; though being spoken to he does not answer, being caught in the noose of death. (GaP.1.17-24).

Here, the sinner has become diseased due to his *karma*, and it is this bodily condition that eventually produces a NDE, along with his imminent death. However, the sinner does not encounter a pleasant experience near-death, nor a pleasant death itself. Rather, his *karma*

[40] All quotations from the *Sāroddhāra* of *Gāruḍapurāṇa* are translated by Wood and Subrahmanyam (1911).

continues to be reaped through an extensive and frightful journey to Yama's realm, including a torturous stay in Yama's kingdom:

> In his condition, with mind busy with the support of his family, with senses unconquered, swooning with intense pain he dies amidst his weeping relatives.
> In the last moment, O Târṣkya, a divine vision arises, - all the worlds appear as one, - and he does not attempt to say anything.
> Then, at the destruction of the decayed senses and the numbing of the intelligence, the messengers of Yama come near and life departs.
> When the breath is leaving its place, the moment of dying seems an age, and pain like the stinging of hundred scorpions is experienced.
> Now he emits foam; his mouth becomes filled with saliva.
> The vital breaths of the sinful depart by the lower gateway.
> Then, two terrifying messengers of Yama are come, of fierce aspect, bearing nooses and rods, naked, with grinding teeth,
> As black as crows, with hair erect, with ugly faces, with nails like weapons; seeing whom his heart palpitates and he releases excrement's.
> The man of the size of a thumb, crying out 'oh, oh,' is dragged from the body by the servants of Yama, looking the while at his own body.
> Having put round him a body of torment, and bound the noose about his neck, they forcibly lead him a long way, like the king's officers a convict.
> While thus leading him the messengers menace him, and recount over and over again the awful terrors of the hells,-
> 'Hurry up, you wicked man. You shall go to the abode of Yama. We will lead you now, without delay, to Kumbhîpâka and the other hells.'
> Then hearing these words, and the weeping of his relatives; crying loudly 'Oh, oh,' he is beaten by the servants of Yama.
> With failing heart and shuddering at their threats, bitten by dogs upon the way, afflicted, remembering his misdeeds,
> Hungry and thirsty, roasting in the sun, forest-fires and hot winds, struck upon the back with whips, painfully he walks, almost powerless, along a road of burning sand, shelterless and waterless.
> Here and there falling exhausted and insensible, and rising again, - in this way, very miserably led through the darkness to the abode of Yama,
> The man is brought there in a short time and the messengers show him the terrible torments of hell.
> Having seen the fearful Yama, the man, after a time, by command of Yama, swiftly comes back through the air, with the messengers.
> Having returned, bound by his past tendencies, desiring the body but held back with a noose by the followers of Yama, tortured by hunger and thirst, he weeps. (GaP.1.25-42).

As this passage depicts the tortures sinners experience on their journey to Yama's realm, the individual in this narrative is not said to return from death. However, this passage portrays the individuals NDE as it provides an accurate and detailed description of the specific features associated with this phenomenon: the encounter with Yama's messengers on his

journey to Yama's realm; the method the messengers use to reprimand the sinner (the noose); the experience of meeting with Yama upon his arrival; the feeling of dying; and the perception of separation of the physical body. It is interesting to note that the latter feature is unambiguously referred to when the passage states that the man 'is dragged from the body by the servants of Yama, looking the while at his own body' (GaP.1.32). In addition to these specific characteristics, we are also provided with further descriptors regarding the NDE throughout the passage. These include: the horrific appearance of the messengers; and the torments the individual suffers throughout his journey, i.e., being beaten, starved, and bitten by dogs.

Moreover, this passage also proves vital for understanding NDEs as disease is portrayed to be the instigating factor of the individual's vision and death: the individual experiences disease as a result of *karma*; this then leads to a vision before death; on his way to Yama he encounters an extensive torturous journey; and finally, he encounters Yama before further enduring more torments due to his misdeeds. Through such observations it becomes apparent that this narrative explains the experience of an individual when near-death, and it also confirms my supposition that illness and visions are not only closely associated with NDEs in India, but when the visions occur due to an illness, they are the NDE itself.

4.2. Discussion and Analysis.

The selected passages discussed from the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas portray the phenomena known as a NDE primarily through the representation of a vision. In the tale of Sāvitrī from the *Mahābhārata*, and the 'Greatness of Dharmarājeśvara' found in the *Skandapurāṇa*, the vision is produced from an individual's death and a visitation. When Satyavat died, Yama came to claim his soul and this produced a vision through visitation for Sāvirtrī. Similarly, when the Brāhmaṇa's son dies, the father (Upādhyāya) also has a vision through Yama's visitation.

However, in the *Sāroddhāra* of *Gāruḍapurāṇa*, the individual's vision is produced through his disease, and this ultimately leads to his death. Here, it is interesting to note that no matter the circumstance the vision has arisen from, it nevertheless draws upon the distinguishing features of a NDE. Indeed, the characteristics associated with NDEs appear to be similar throughout the three post-Vedic narratives, although there does appear to be some slight variations.

In the tale of Sāvitrī and the 'Greatness of Dharmarājeśvara', the individuals who passed away both returned to life, and when this happened, they too had a NDE depicted through an encounter with Yama. Such notion is one of the distinguishing features of this type of phenomena and is referred to as the decision of conscious return. Accordingly, in these two experiences, the decision rests with Yama: in the *Mahābhārata*, the Lord of the Dead agreed to allow Satyavat to return to life after he granted Sāvitrī a boon; and in the *Skandapurāṇa*, Yama is the one who brought the Brāhmaṇa's son back to life after he became sympathetic. Conversely, in the *Sāroddhāra* of *Gāruḍapurāṇa*, the sinner remains in Yama's realm on his command. On this basis, it thus appears as though post-Vedic literature personifies Yama to be a judge as it is Yama himself who decides upon the individual's fate, i.e. if they return to life or if they remain in his realm for a period of time. Moreover, this assumption coincides with other notions also prominent within these post-Vedic NDEs: 1) the idea that an individual's experience near-death is determined by their *karma*; and 2) it is also their karmic deeds that facilitate Yama's judgement.

In all three passages, the concept of *karma* and acting in accordance with one's *dharma* is drawn upon. In the tale of Sāvitrī, good *karma* produces positive outcomes. Through her performance of austerities, Sāvitrī can see Yama and is granted boons. Furthermore, because Satyavat lived a dharmic life, it is Yama who comes to claim his soul and it is Yama who revives him. Correspondingly, in the 'Greatness of Dharmarājeśvara', the *brāhmaṇa*'s actions cause Yama to return his son to life, and in the latter verses, both the father and son perform

devotion rituals to honour Yama, much to Yama's delight.[41] Indeed, these passages exemplify that if one performs *bhakti* and acts in accordance with *dharma*, their deeds produce good *karma*, and they receive a positive consequence. On the other hand, in the *Sāroddhāra* of *Gāruḍapurāṇa*, the sinner has produced bad *karma* by not acting in accordance with the law, and thus not only sustains an illness but is also retained in Yama's realm enduring punishment. On this basis, these passages identify that *karma* not only determines the consequence one receives, but it also governs the NDE itself. By acting righteously, Sāvitrī, Satyavat, the *brāhamaṇa* and his son all encountered Yama, in addition to their positive consequence, i.e. being granted boons and returned to life by Yama himself. Yet, in the case of the sinner, it was not Yama who appeared to retain his soul. Instead, it was the fearful messengers of Yama who ensured the sinner had a torturous journey to Yama's kingdom. Overall, this suggests that pious individuals who encounter a NDE are met by Yama, whereas sinners encountering this experience face Yama's messengers.

In this chapter, I have found that NDEs in post-Vedic literature are depicted through visions that are produced from dreams, visitation, illness and another's death. I have also shown that *karma* and *dharma* play a large role in determining one's consequence and the NDE itself. In the next section, I will move my focus from NDEs in Indian literature to ethnographic accounts of NDEs in contemporary Hinduism.

[41] These latter verses in the *Skandapurāṇa* further reaffirm the idea of acting in accordance to the law and performing *bhakti* as they assert that those who perform these deeds will avoid a premature death; again, a positive consequence of good *karma*.

Chapter 5

Modern and Contemporary Ethnographies

The term 'ethnography' (*éthnos*, people and *gráphein*, to write) means to write about people. Yet this term also involves a wider framework as it is also 'used to describe both ethnography as practice – fieldwork in which participant observation is central but which may also include other approaches such as interviews and quantitative surveys … and ethnography as product – the written text or ethnographic monograph' (Macdonald, 2001, 60). In its earlier stages, ethnography tended to take two forms: it either reflected the ethnographers' genuine interest to observe the way of life of non-western civilisations (Hymes, 1996, 4-5), or it presented the preconceptions and negative interpretations of other cultures. For instance, in colonial ethnographies, the writer is often seen to produce falsifications and 'dehistoricized representations of either subject, or object, or both, that obscure, obliterate, or transform the relationship negotiated in practice' (Pels and Salemink, 1999, 4). The resulting identification of self and the other arose from the historical relationship between geographical locations and Europe - one based on trade, travel, conquest or conversion (Pels and Salemink, 1999, 4) – and it is this relationship that caused many colonial ethnographers to diminish non-Christian people and their activities. However, in the post-colonial era, the practice of ethnography developed into one concerned with ethics and reflexivity.[42] As such, it is now the duty of ethnographers to work in this manner by complying and adhering to the code of ethics established by the American Anthropological Association.[43]

5.1. Vision and possession in relation to Near-death Experiences.

[42] 'Ethnography was also put under the spotlight by two […] important and interrelated developments in the 1970's: the anthropology of women, and analytical and ethnographic reflexivity' (Macdonald, 2001, 68).
[43] For the code of ethics, see American Anthropological Association (1998).

In contemporary India, beliefs about illness, disease and death have remained very close to those found in the *Māhabhārata* and Purāṇic literature. For Hindus, death is part of the reoccurring cycle of events and it is connected to one's *karma*, *dharma* and rebirth. *Dharma* is dependent on one's *varṇa* and *āśrama* and it determines whether one's actions are good and meritorious, or bad and sinful (Freed and Freed, 1980, 536). When an individual passes away, the *karma* accrued throughout their lifetime becomes the determining factor for what happens to their soul. When the cremation of the individual has taken place, the soul is said to return to the earth and remain in the cremation grounds for thirteen days. After this period, the soul journeys to Yama's realm. It is there that 'Yama with the assistance of Citra-Gupta … balances the good and bad actions of each soul' (Freed and Freed, 1993, 62). After judging the deeds, Yama decides upon the destination of the soul: rebirth and the soul's new form, liberation from *saṃsāra*, or a wandering ghost (Freed and Freed, 1993, 62). With regards to the latter destination, the individual's soul is believed to become a ghost if they died before their allotted time, or if Yama decided so (Daniélou, 1964, 23). Moreover, one's *karma* is not only judged by Yama; it also determines the consequences one will endure in their next life. For instance, Hindus generally believe that disease is inherited. However, 'such inheritance is [said to be] due to a soul's bad actions in past lives' (Freed and Freed, 1993, 103), and is thus the consequence of bad *karma*. Alternatively, if an individual has produced good *karma* they may be rewarded with wealth and health in their next life.

After drawing on contemporary Indian concepts of death, illness and disease, it is apparent that these bodily conditions are interconnected with *karma* and *dharma*. Yet, at the same time, it also becomes apparent that death, illness and disease are associated with NDEs. This can be observed in ethnographic accounts of NDEs primarily described by Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson. In this case, a wider range of ethnographic sources drawing upon

NDEs cannot be provided as no other scholars have conducted ethnography in relation to this phenomena in India.

The idea that a NDE arises from illness or disease can be witnessed in three ethnographies. The first account tells of Chhajju Bania's (a forty-year old Hindu male). NDE occurred around six years earlier, when he became ill with fever (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 167):

> Four black messengers came and held me. I asked, 'Where are you taking me?' They took me and seated me near the god. My body had become small. There was an old lady sitting there. She had a pen in her hand, and the clerks had a heap of books in front of them. I was summoned …. One of the clerks said, 'We don't need Chhajju Banian (trader). We had asked for Chhajju Kumhar (potter). Push him back and bring the other man. He [meaning Chhajju Bania] has some life remaining.' I asked the clerks to give me some work to do, but not to send me back. Yamraj was there sitting on a high chair with a white beard and wearing yellow clothes. He asked me, "what do you want?' I told him that I wanted to stay there. He asked me to extend my hand. I don't remember whether he have me something or not. Then I was pushed down [and revived]. (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 167).

In addition to Bania's account, Pasricha and Stevenson also provided the following information:

> Chhajju told us that he later learned that a person called Chhajju Kumhar had died at about the same time that he (Chhajju Bania) revived … Chhajju's wife, Saroj, remembered her husband's experience, but her account (to us) of what he told her about the NDE differed in some details from his statement. For example, she said he had told her (after reviving) that at the place to which the four men had taken him there "was a man with a beard with lots of papers in front of him" (not an old lady). (1986, 167).

The second ethnographic account is given by a Hindu woman, Javanamma. She too describes a NDE that arose from a fever (Pasricha, 1993, 167):

> I was dragged 'up' by four yamadoots (messengers of the god of death, Yamaraj). I saw one door, and went inside. I saw my mother and father there. I also saw Yama who was fat and had books in front of him. The Yama started beating the yamadoots for having taken me there instead of another person. (The name of the 'other' person was not mentioned). While the yamadoots were being beaten up, I was accidentally hit on the back. As a result, I felt a

> severe pain and developed a mark on my back. The pain was more severe there (in the other realm) than it was after I returned back. I was asked by my parents and the Yama to be sent back. I was scared to be there because there were so many people, and I was happy to be back so I could see my children. (Pasricha, 1993, 167).

The third account provided by Srinivasa Reddy, a seventy-five-year-old Hindu male, tells of a NDE that arose thirty years earlier when he contracted a fever (Pasricha, 2008, 273). However, in this instance, it is also important to note that at time Reddy was ill, he was also taking medication to cure his illness:

> Two people came and asked me to go with them. I went with them walking on a mud road. We walked for a long time and reached a big place, which was like a city. There were big houses and many people. We went inside a big house where I saw a man with a big book to the left of Yamraj. The man with the book said, "Why have you come here?" I said, "These people have brought me here." He said, "You are not required here; I asked for Ashwath Reddy. You go back," and asked those two persons to bring Ashwath Reddy. We came out; while coming out I told them that I was suffering from fever; could they give me some medicine to cure my illness? They took me to an old lady who gave me some herbal juice which I drank and came back with them; the left me outside my village.
> After I came back [from the other realm] my fever came under control quickly and since then I have not suffered from fever even once. For this reason the memory of my experience is still fresh in my mind. (Pasricha, 2008, 273).

In addition to Reddy's account, Pasricha also wrote:

> Muniyamma [Ashwath Reddy's wife] told us that one Ashwath Reddy in their village, who was about 80 years old and was ill for sometime, died that day. Her husband apparently did not know of his death, although it is possible that he knew of his illness. (2008, 273).

In each of these three accounts, it is evident that the NDE took place after the individual had developed a fever. Most often, their experience included an encounter with Yama's messengers, Yama himself, and a clerk (most likely Citragupta). Further, all three accounts mention that their identity had been mistaken for someone else, and this resulted in them being brought back to life.

Although these three cases describe NDEs that were produced from an illness, NDEs have also occurred when an individual has either died or come close to death due to an accident. For instance, Munnichinnappa, a forty-nine-year-old Hindu male, recalled his NDE that took place when he was twelve-years-old and had fallen from a tree and died (Pasricha, 2008, 271):

> Two big black persons with big mustaches came and asked me to go along with them. When I resisted, they held my hand and took me forcibly. While going, I saw a big forest with big trees and it was dark there. We walked some distance and came across a big river. After crossing the river, we reached a place where the light was very bright, brighter than the sunlight, and people there looked very strange. When I went inside that place, I saw Yamaraja was sitting in a chair with many other persons. I was taken to one person who was sitting in a corner with a big book. He looked at me and said, "I did not ask for this person. Send him back; I had asked for a different person." I did not know how to get back; the two persons who had taken me there came with me and left me outside the village. (Pasricha, 2008, 272).

Similar to this account, Annamma's (a Hindu woman aged seventy-five years old) NDE took place when she was around forty years-old and had been knocked unconscious after hitting her head (Pasricha, 2008, 272):

> One lady came and asked me to follow her, which I did. We walked through a forest; there were big trees. After some time we reached a big place that looked like a city. There were many people and they were busy with their work. That lady took me into a big house and left me at the gate to go inside. When I went in, I saw Yamarāja; a huge black person was [also] sitting there. On that person's questioning I told him my name and he said, "You don't have a seat here; you go back." Yamarāja also told me to go back and asked a person to take me out. One black person came and took me to a place where fire was burning. He burned me with a burning wood on the right leg (below the knee) and called the same lady (who had brought me there) to take me back. While coming from there, I saw my father there (who had died six years earlier). He inquired about the people of the family and asked me to go back. We followed the same route and came back. When I reached the village, I saw my body was lying on a mat (Pasricha, 2008, 272).

In these two accounts, the NDE arose when the individual was near-death after being involved in an accident. In each case, the encounter explicitly involved 'black persons', Yamarāja, and mistaken identity. However, the former ethnography also explicitly includes mythological representations of Yama's realm, whereas the latter ethnography includes other

features specific of NDEs, namely an encounter with a family member and an outer-body-experience (seeing the body as separate from themselves). With regards to Munnichinnappa's account, the mythological details are an important insight to Hindu NDEs as it indicates that this phenomenon is influenced by external cultural factors. This is most prominent in Munnichinnappa's narrative, especially when he describes how he came across a large river which he eventually had to cross. The specific detail of crossing a river when making the journey to Yama's realm is also mentioned in Purāṇic mythology and thus signifies that Indian literature influences Hindu NDEs.

In another ethnographic account - given by Mangal Singh, a seventy-nine-year-old Hindu male – it emerges that an individual does not necessarily have to be near-death after an accident or illness when experiencing a NDE:

> I was lying down on a cot when two people came, lifted me up, and took me along. I heard a hissing sound, but I couldn't see anything. Then I came to a gate. There was grass, and the ground seemed to be sloping. A man was there, and he reprimanded the men who brought me: "Why have you brought the wrong person? Why have you not brought the man you had been sent for?" The two men [who had brought Mangal] ran away, and the senior man said, 'You go back.' Suddenly I saw two big pots of boiling water, although there was no fire, no firewood, and no fireplace. Then the man pushed me with his hand and said, 'You better hurry up and go back.' When he touched me, I suddenly became aware of how hot his hand was. Then I realized why the pots were boiling. The heat was coming from his hands. Suddenly I regained consciousness, and I had a severe burning sensation in my left arm. (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, 167).

In addition to Singh's account, Pasricha and Stevenson noted some important details also provided by the individual in relation to his NDE:

> In response to our questions, Mangal said that he thought that he might have been sleeping at the time of the experience, be he was not sure of this. He was unable to describe the appearance of the persons figuring in the experience … He did remember that the senior "official" had picked up a *lathi* (heavy Indian staff) with which he intended to beat the lesser "employees" before they ran away. Another person had died in the locality at or about the time he revived, but Mangal and his family made no inquires about the suddenness of this person's death and did not even learn his name (1986, 167).

Although Singh's account does not overtly mention Yama or his messengers, it remains a vital description of an Indian NDE as it: 1) indicates that Indian NDEs may arise during a state of rest, i.e. sleeping; and 2) it depicts the features also mentioned in the other Indian NDEs, despite there being no specific names or description of the people encountered.

5.2. Discussion and Analysis.

In the ethnographic accounts discussed above, NDEs are produced by illness, disease, a state of rest, or an accident. Interestingly, in each NDE, the individual was taken to Yama's realm by messengers, they saw Yama himself, and they were sent back due to a mistake of their identity.[44] However, the details of these prominent aspects tend to differ.

One noticeable aspect that varies throughout these accounts is the appearance and number of Yama's messengers. For instance, in Chhajju Bania's and Munnichinnappa's NDE, the messengers are described as black. However, Bania claims there were four messengers, whereas Munnichinnappa states there were two. In the other accounts, there is no explicit reference as to the appearance of the messengers (apart from Annamma who asserts it was a woman who took her to Yama's realm), and Javanamma recalls four messengers collecting her, whereas Reddy and Singh's description coincide with Munnichinnappa's two messengers. Further, the journey the messengers take the individuals on also differs. In both Annamma's and Munnichinnappa's NDE, the messenger(s) took them through a forest with big trees. Yet, Reddy journeyed along a mud road and through a city, and the other accounts do not provide details about the journey as such. Instead, they tend to describe the details of Yama's kingdom in accordance with the mythology, i.e. a city, grass, gates and the crossing of a river.

[44] In the latter ethnography, the individual tends to refer to a 'senior official' rather than stating Yama's name. However, due to their status, it could be interpreted as Yama.

Another prominent feature of the NDEs is the encounter with a clerk, most likely Citragupta. In some instances, such as Bania, Reddy and Munnichinnappa, the individual spoke of an encounter with a clerk who had a book. After speaking with this clerk, it was then discovered that the individual had been taken there due to a mistake of the messengers, namely they had collected the wrong person. Contrastingly, the other NDEs also spoke of this mistaken identity, yet they did not refer to a clerk with a book. In Javanamma's account, however, there was a book but this belonged to Yama rather than a clerk. Moreover, the NDEs also draw upon additional details that I feel are important to discuss briefly.

In two cases (Ashwath Reddy's and Mangal Singh's), it appears as though another person within the locality died the same moment the individual experiencing the encounter had returned from death, suggesting that the correct individual had been collected by Yama's messengers. In two other accounts (Javanamma's and Annamma's), the individuals had an encounter with their deceased family members, in addition to seeing Yama and his messengers, although their NDE arose from different circumstances: one occurred from fever and the other took place when the individual was left unconscious after hitting her head. And in Bania, Javanamma and Singh's encounter with death, they each experienced a sense of pain when returning to life: either by being pushed back, burnt or hit. Yet, the other individuals recalling their NDE – Reddy, Munnichinnappa and Annamma – explained how they had been left outside of the village when they were returned to life. At this point, I would like to suggest that all variations drawn upon regarding the details of the NDEs are a result of two factors: individuality and cultural influences. For instance, when an individual has a NDE it appears to be determined by their own interpretation as well as external cultural influences, such as literature they may be more familiar with. The supposition of cultural influences determining one's NDE is particularly supported by the notion that contemporary NDEs include mythological features of Yama's realm. This can be observed most prominently in

Munnichinnappa's account when he describes how he crossed a large river: a river also mentioned in the Purāṇas. Further, the variants mentioned (namely the details of Yama's messengers and the individuals return life) are open to individual interpretation as they do not follow a fixed narrative. Unlike Yama – who appears in Indian literature since its earliest sources (namely, the *Ṛgveda*) and thus belonging to a well-established narrative cycle – the identity of Yama's messengers has altered over time and there is no specific framework in which the individual is said to return to the living. On this basis, it appears that these features are fluid and subjective, and it is thus not surprising that they change in the accounts of NDEs provided.

In this chapter, I have identified the circumstances in which NDEs in contemporary India arise from. At the same time, I have also highlighted some of the core features described in each ethnography that appear to be characteristic of Indian NDEs, namely an encounter with Yama's messengers, Yama himself, a clerk with a book and an event returning the individual back to life. Moreover, after drawing upon NDEs from different periods of history - the Vedic period, post-Vedic period and the contemporary era – the next chapter will now analyse, discuss and compare the various instances of NDEs. This will: 1) clarify how visions involving Yama in sacred literature are NDEs; 2) enable me to determine if the NDEs have developed over time, and if so why and how have they altered; and 3) it will also allow me to ascertain the prominent features of Indian NDEs.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Comparative analysis of ancient and modern NDEs.

Throughout the many ancient and contemporary narratives of NDE, there are some features that seem to recur whilst others differ or have been altered over time. The features that remain the same or have been minimally modified, could be classified as distinctive characteristics of Indian NDEs. Conversely, the aspects that differ or have altered over time may have been influenced by, or dependent on external factors such as cultural and socio-religious developments.

One of the most prominent features described in every narrative representative of a NDE is an encounter with Yama. In Vedic literature, the individual either has a brief vision of Yama or they engage in conversation with the Lord of the Dead himself. Interestingly, throughout these narratives, Yama is not characterised as a God to be feared, nor is the place where he resides. Instead, early Vedic literature associates Yama with light and the *pitṛloka.* For this reason, in NDEs from this period, the individual does not fear death and their encounter with Yama is most often pleasant. It could be proposed that the lack of fear surrounding death was most likely due to the understanding of it being a natural phenomenon that enabled one to pass over to the *pitṛloka.* Thus, in this earlier period, death was not considered the end of life but was the means for achieving liberation in the abode of the ancestors. Moreover, in some instances, the individual may have also encountered Yama's messengers: primarily two dogs that guide the individual to Yama's realm, or birds of bad omen. Further, in this literature, it was not generally mentioned that an individual was reprimanded to be taken to Yama's realm. Instead, the narrative would depict a change of dimension through a type of journey. However, these aspects alter dramatically in comparison to the NDEs portrayed in post-Vedic literature and contemporary India.

The encounter with Yama begins to change with the Upaniṣads, and is fully transformed in classical and contemporary Indian experiences. For instance, in the later Upaniṣadic passages (KaU.1-2) the NDE reflects the idea of rebirth and liberation. This is introduced when Yama is in dialogue with Naciketas. Rather than encountering Yama within the context of the *pitṛloka*, the individual's NDE (in this case Naciketas') has now shifted to a characterisation of Yama within the framework of *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa*; a development that most likely reflects the culmination and influence of religious ideas from Jainism, Buddhism and Ājīvikism during this period. Here it is apt to note that the Buddhist worldview not only appears to have influenced NDEs. It also seems to have been constructed on a myth of foundation in which Prince Siddhārtha Gautama engages in a fearsome encounter with Death. This is shown in the *Buddhacarita* (*Life of the Buddha*) of Aśvaghoṣa (c. 80-150 CE) (translated by Olivelle, 2008), when Māra ('Death') attacks the Buddha who is about to achieve *nirvāṇa*.[45] The narrative demonstrates the cultural permeability of religions in India. Moreover, in post-Vedic literature, the Lord of the Dead continues to be represented within the terms of *sāṃsara* and *mokṣa*, although there does appear to be more focus and centrality on the idea of *karma* and karmic consequence.

In the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇic literature, Yama is described in more explicit terms, i.e. we are told Yama carries a noose or rod, and in Sāvitrī's encounter she describes features of Yama not previously mentioned such as his clothes, eyes and fearful nature. In particular, Yama is said to be a fearful judge who decides the fate of the individual. This portrayal of Yama is particularly noteworthy because it appears to reflect the core belief found in this popular genre of literature: the fully developed concept of *karma* and the idea of its inevitable nature, i.e. it follows one even to their death. Moreover, in the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas, the

[45] Cf. *Canto 13: Victory of Mara*; *Canto 23: Visit by Lichchavis and Sermon on Discipline*; and *Canto 26: The Mahaparinirvána* (See Olivelle, 2008).

method in which the individual is reprimanded before travelling to Yama's realm is explicitly stated and is dependent on one's *karma*. If an individual has acted in accordance with *dharma* and produced good *karma*, they are met by Yama.[46] Those who are judged guilty of living by *adharma* encounter Yama's messengers: the frightful *yamadūtas* who seem to enjoy torturing sinners on their journey to Yama's realm. Although the sinners are not met by Yama at the time of their death, they do meet with him upon their arrival in the Yamaloka, and in some instances, they also meet with Citragupta. Here, it is also important to note that when Yama or his messengers retain the individual, the idea of a soul is drawn upon.

Unlike Vedic literature, the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas describe how the soul is taken or separated from the body. In many instances, this is portrayed when the soul is described as thumb-sized, or it is said that the individual is looking at their body. Moreover, at this point in Indian literature we can clearly observe the fundamental role *karma* plays in NDEs: 1) it has evolved Yama's character into a judge who determines one's state in the next life; 2) Yama's messengers are adapted to suit the nature of *karma*, that is the *yamadūtas* are depicted to torture and collect the sinners once they have passed away and Citragupta, a new associate, has the main duty of recording all karmic deeds; and 3) the deeds performed by an individual in this life determine the NDE, that is if they have a pleasant encounter with Yama, or a dreadful encounter with his messengers. Importantly, these features of post-Vedic NDEs continue to appear in contemporary Indian NDEs. However, there are some slight differences.

In each ethnography, the individual described an encounter with Yama upon their arrival in his realm. Most often, the encounter was brief and the fearful nature and appearance of Yama was not mentioned; although in one account (Chhajju Bania's) Yama was said to be wearing yellow clothes. This detail was also one mentioned by Sāvitrī in the *Mahābhārata*. In each experience, the individual also described how they were taken to Yama's realm by his

[46] This is reaffirmed by Yama himself in the tale of Sāvitrī, see page 31.

messengers.[47] This aspect differs to that mentioned in post-Vedic literature as the individuals are continuously reprimanded by the *yamadūtas*, and do not mention Yama at this stage of their NDE. For this reason, it cannot be ascertained from the ethnographies if one's *karma* determines who they are reprimanded by when initially making their journey to Yama's kingdom. However, it is clear that *karma* serves a certain function within contemporary Indian NDEs.

Similar to the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas, individuals in contemporary India are said to be judged by their deeds. In most ethnographies, the individual described how they saw Yama sitting in a chair, and near or next to him was a clerk with a book (who I would suggest is Citragupta). Upon this encounter with Yama and the clerk, it was discovered that the individual had been taken to death too soon (due to a mistake of their identity) and they were told to return to life. Such notion differs to all other literary Indian NDEs drawn upon – as it has never previously been mentioned – and it also varies from Western NDEs. This is because the individual is sent back on the decision of Yama or Citragupta and not due to a decision made consciously by the individual themselves or their family: although in Javanamma's account she asserted that it was both her family and Yama who wanted her to return to her life. Further, it is also evident that the decision of return is based on the individual's karmic record as each experience described how the clerk (Citragupta) resolved that it was not their time to die only after looking at their book. Also described in the ethnographies was the individuals return to life. In each experience, the individual had initially experienced a sense of pain from being pushed, hit or burnt, or they had been left outside of their village. Such notion is another new feature incorporated into Indian NDEs as no Vedic or post-Vedic narrative refers to this kind of return. Conversely, Vedic NDEs do not explicitly characterise the return of the individual, although post-Vedic NDEs do state the individuals return but in terms of awakening from a

[47] See pages 47-48 for a comparison of the messengers described in the accounts.

dream or being brought back to their family by Yama himself.

Another prominent aspect of Indian NDEs is the circumstance in which they arise. In Vedic narratives, this phenomenon occurred when an individual was ill, in the rested state of sleep (through a dream), or had consumed a drug (*soma*). Similarly, in the Purāṇic narratives and contemporary ethnographies the individuals were either in a state of rest (sleeping) or they were suffering from an illness. Yet, in the contemporary ethnographies, an individual also had a NDE after taking medication for their illness, which is similar to the Vedic circumstance of consuming *soma* as both are drugs, and two other individuals had a NDE after coming close to death due to an accident. Moreover, it is striking that in every contemporary account where the NDE arose from an illness, the individual was said to be suffering with fever. This seems a key feature of contemporary Indian NDEs and I would suggest that this coincides with the Purāṇic idea that ailments work alongside Yama and Citragupta by entering into an individual in order to take them to Yama's realm. In particular, this assumption seems to be confirmed by the account of Reddy as his illness ceased after he returned, thus suggesting that ailments were originally sent to claim his body, but as it was not his time to pass over, his body thereafter remained in good health. Such concept also seems to correspond with another notion prevalent in early Vedic literature.

Similar to post-Vedic and contemporary NDEs, Atharvanic hymns seem to draw upon the idea of Yama being associated with illness and death. More specifically, the *Atharvaveda* associates with Yama with possession of the body. This can be observed in the hymns discussed (AV 5.30 and AV 8.21) as they tend to imply that Yama and death are taking hold of the individual through their bodily illness; a concept which seems to be reflected in later Indian literature and contemporary NDEs and beliefs. Also evident in the *Atharvaveda* is the idea that incantations are not only invoked in order to rid the body of the illness, but they are means for avoiding Yama and death. Thus, it could be suggested that this is the early formation of the

two significant relationships fully developed in the *Māhabhārata* and Purāṇas: 1) Yama and Mṛtyu; and 2) Yama and illness or ailments. It is, however, important to recognise that Yama is only associated with possession in the *Atharvaveda*. In other Vedic and post-Vedic literature representative of NDEs, Yama has a close relationship with death and illness but is primarily associated with visions: it is the ailments that tend to possess the body. This concept is also drawn upon in the contemporary ethnographies discussed as they too describe Yama as a vision (in which he is encountered) and ailments as a possessive condition.

After comparing and analysing the various NDEs it is evident that this phenomenon in India has in some ways remained the same, but in others, altered due to significant cultural and socio-religious developments. Before the influence of Jainism, Buddhism and Ājīvikism, NDEs involved an encounter with Yama and his messengers, primarily the two dogs and birds of omen, and were based within the framework of the *pitṛloka* as determined by one's sacrificial activity. However, this framework began to adjust in the Upaniṣads into one based around the idea of rebirth and liberation, and it became fully developed in post-Vedic and contemporary NDEs. As shown, post-Vedic and contemporary NDEs not only involve an encounter with Yama, who is now understood to be a judge of one's deeds, or Citragupta, his assistant, but they have also adapted to become based upon these understandings due to the influence of the core Hindu belief in *karma* and karmic consequence.

Conclusion

By using a historical and comparative methodology, I have identified narratives describing NDEs from various periods and the significant traits and developments of this phenomena in India, specifically within the Hindu tradition. According to Witzel, it is this type of methodology that must employed in order 'to be successful in our field' as it allows for a 'close study of both the ancient and modern evidence' (Witzel, 2014, 36). This has certainly proved true throughout this dissertation. To begin with, I drew upon the mythology of Yama and the scientific and cultural explanations of NDEs. I then moved on to use these aspects by identifying their occurrence in Indian literature and contemporary ethnographies, i.e. if these sources included the traits of NDEs and mythological characteristics of Yama. Similar to Pasricha and Stevenson, I established the main features of Indian NDEs to be an encounter with Yama and an encounter with his messengers. However, I also recognised further details pertaining to these meetings, as well as an additional feature of this phenomenon: the circumstances in which it occurs. In relation to the encounter with the Lord of the Dead, I recognised that: 1) Yama is predominantly presented in terms of a vision in each NDE, although the *Atharvaveda* associates Yama with possession; 2) the character of Yama develops in line with the changing socio-religious context; and 3) an encounter with this religious figure when near-death transcends religion in India as it also described in Buddhist literature.

Regarding the circumstances in which this phenomenon occurs, I established that NDEs in India are produced from: illness, the consumption of a drug, or when in a state of rest (sleeping). These conditions continuously reoccurred throughout all NDEs discussed; although contemporary NDEs were also shown to occur when an individual came close to death due to an accident. Through the identification of these core features of Indian NDEs, I have confirmed my supposition that visions and *atharvanic* possessions are NDEs when they arise from these

conditions and involve these characteristics. I have also reaffirmed that narratives drawing upon these features are representative of this phenomenon in India.

Moreover, I have ascertained that the overall features of Indian NDEs (encountering Yama, his messengers or the circumstances of their occurrence), have remained the same throughout the historical and contemporary periods. Yet, their characteristics and framework have altered from sacrificial activity to karmic activity - as shown particularly in the case of Yama's character and his messengers - due to the external influence of other Indic religions (Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvikism). In fact, it is not only this phenomenon that has been shaped by the changing socio-religious context. Individuals NDEs in contemporary India have also been largely influenced by Indian literature, especially post-Vedic literature, as the key themes (Yama, his messengers, ailments, *karma*, and the mythological description of Yama's kingdom) indisputably appear in the ethnographic accounts described.

Despite all my original findings, I believe that there is a need for further ethnographic research in relation to NDEs in contemporary India. This would enable us to recognise the significance of these experiences in India today, and it would also provide a more in-depth analysis of the features and circumstances in which this phenomenon arises in the modern era. Such recognition of this aspect of Hinduism is vital for our field as it not only connects ancient beliefs with the twenty-first century, but it also highlights the changing understandings of death and the way in which religion has come to problematize death across history.

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Appendix A

Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.9-29: A dialogue between Yama and Naciketas.

[DEATH]

Three nights, O Brahmin, you stayed in my house,
a guest worthy of homage, without any food;
Three wishes, therefore, deign to make in return.
So homage to you, O Brahmin!
And may I fare well!

[NACIKETAS]

That with his temper cooled, his anger subdued,
Gautama, O Death, be to me well-disposed.
That he greet me with joy, when by you I'm dismissed—
this is the first of my three wishes.

[DEATH]

He'll be affable in the future, just as before;
Auddalaka Aruni, I have dismissed you.
He'll have restful nights, his anger subdued,
seeing you released from the jaws of Death.

[NACIKETAS]

In the world of heaven there is no fear;
there one has no fear of old age or you.
Transcending both these—both hunger and thirst,
beyond all sorrows, one rejoices in heaven.
You, O Death, are studying,
the fire-altar that leads to heaven;
Explain that to me, a man who has faith;
People who are in heaven enjoy the immortal state—
It is this I choose with my second wish.

[DEATH]

I shall explain to you—
and heed this teaching of mine,
O Naciketas, you who understand—
the fire-altar that leads to heaven,
to the attainment of an endless world,
and is its very foundation.
Know that it lies hidden,
In the cave of the heart.

[NARRATOR]

He described to him that fire-altar—
the beginning of the world—
What type the bricks, how many; and how they are to be laid;
and he repeated it exactly as described.
Delighted at him, then, Death said to him again;
Well-pleased, the large-hearted one said to him:

[DEATH]

Here I grant you another wish today.
This fire-altar will bear your very name.
Take also this glittering disk of gold.
This is a three-Naciketa man—
Uniting with the three, performing the triple rite,
he crosses over birth and death.
Perceiving the *brahman* that is being born,
as the god who is to be adored,
recognizing this disk of gold to be that,
he attains unending peace.

This is a three-Naciketa man—
Knowing these three, and, with that knowledge,
Piling the altar of Naciketas,
he shoves aside the fetters of death before him,
passes beyond sorrow,
and rejoices in heaven.
This, Naciketas, is your fire that leads to heaven,
which you chose with your second wish.
People will proclaim this your very own fire.
Choose your third wish, O Naciketas.

[NACIKETAS] There is this doubt about a man who is dead.
"He exists," say some, others, "He exists not."
I want to know this, so please teach me.
This is the third of my three wishes.

[DEATH] As to this even the gods of old had doubts,
for it's hard to understand, it's a subtle doctrine.
Make, Naciketas, another wish.
Do not press me! Release me from this.

[NACIKETAS] As to this, we're told, even the gods had doubts;
and you say, O Death, it's hard to understand.
But another like you I can't find to explain it;
and there's no other wish that is equal to it.

[DEATH] Choose sons and grandsons who'd live a hundred years!
Plenty of livestock and elephants, horses and gold!
Choose as your domain a wide expanse of earth!
And you yourself live as many autumns as you wish!
And if you would think this is an equal wish—
You may choose wealth together with a long life;
Achieve prominence, Naciketas, in this wide world;
And I will make you enjoy your desires at will.
You may ask freely for all those desires,
hard to obtain in this mortal world;
Look at these lovely girls, with chariots and lutes,
girls of this sort are unobtainable by men—
I'll give them to you; you'll have them wait on you;
but about death don't ask me, Naciketas.

[NACIKETAS] Since the passing days of a mortal, O Death,
sap here the energy of all the senses;
And even a full life is but a trifle;
so keep your horses, your songs and dances!
With wealth you cannot make a man content;
Will we get to keep wealth, when we have seen you?
And we get to live only as long as you will allow!
So, this alone is the wish that I'd like to choose.
What mortal man with insight,
who has met those that do not die or grow old,
himself growing old in this wretched and lowly place,
looking at its beauties, its pleasures and joys,
would delight in a long life?
The point on which they have great doubts—
what happens at that great transit—
tell me that, O Death!
This is my wish, probing the mystery deep.
Naciketas wishes for nothing
other than that. (KaU.1.9-29)